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Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York, N. Y., Post Office.

May 17, 1893.

No. 488.

\$2.50
a Year.

Published Weekly by Beadle and Adams,
No. 98 WILLIAM ST. NEW YORK.

Price,
Five Cents.

VOL. XXXVIII.

HARRY WINKLE'S LONG CHASE



"A'MITEY MOSES, BUT YER KIM NEAH GITTIN' A CRACK ACROSS YER SKULL. WHAT YER
WANT TO STEAL DAT HOSS FUR—EH?"

Harry Winkle's Long Chase;

OR,

THE HAUNTED HUNTER.

BY WILLIAM R. EYSTER.

CHAPTER I.

A CORPSE IN THE STREAM.

THERE is a peculiar hiss when a rifle-ball passes in close proximity to one's head, a sound that no doubt chords with some musical note, yet upon most ears the noise is apt to fall rather unpleasantly. So the trapper, though thoroughly seasoned to danger and the thousand chances and mischances of the bush and plain, dodged his head suddenly, with a movement more energetic than graceful, at the same time uttering, though not above a whisper, an ejaculation of surprise and discontent. In the midst of his reconnoitering it seemed to him that he had been reconnoitered, and that to some purpose. There was danger in the atmosphere.

Carefully he peered around him. He caught no sight of the hand that had fired the shot: he could see nothing and could hear nothing that gave sign of hostile intentions. Through the bushes that were spread before him like a curtain he anxiously gazed, with one hand pushing them aside.

"Where the dickens c'u'd that 'a' come from?" he muttered. "Some one hez hed a line shot on this hyer old hoss and cum mighty nigh a-send-in' him under. Ef I could only git a site at the varmint ther'd be a case o' suddint death, sure—ah!"

The soliloquy ceased, for on the small level spot on the opposite side of the stream, standing out bold and full in the clear moonlight, there appeared two men. The distance was not great, their actions evinced no knowledge that any other human being was near them, and as they broke into conversation every word they spoke was wafted distinctly to the ears of the listener, who lay concealed in the close hanging bushes.

One of these two men was tall and shapely in build. His form gave token of strength and activity, while the moonbeams that fell upon his face lit up a countenance that was more than ordinarily handsome. One hand rested upon the muzzle-end of a heavy rifle, the other was extended in a shunning gesture, as if waving back the man who faced him.

The other was, if anything, shorter in stature, but made up for any lack of height in breadth of build. His shoulders were almost herculean in shape, his hands were large, his neck thick and powerful—altogether his appearance promised strength rather than activity. His face could scarcely be distinguished, but even in the shadow one could fancifully map out a countenance indicative of boldness and resolution.

Thus the two stood in the moonlight, scarcely three yards apart and facing each other.

"You're quick on the trigger," said the short man, "and if it had been daylight I might have

gone under. I'm not one to bear malice, though it's a rough old joke to be shot at. If it was some men you'd not be standing now."

"I know it. Yet daylight or dark, if I had not discovered my mistake in time, I should have been standing and you down. As I pulled the trigger I raised the barrel, for I saw it was the wrong man. The right one is near me somewhere, though, and had you been he, the scores would have all been wiped out by this time."

"I thought so. I kinder saw you hitch up your iron, so I knew you had made a mistake when you threw the tube to your shoulder. It was a sudden thought—and not the first time a white man has drawn sights on me. I've been watching you since you came around here; I've been waiting for you to show your hand, and I want to know to-night what your game is. If you are on the square, with no infernal curious kinks in yer nature, well an' good. But if ye want to know more than ye see, if ye must take a hand in what don't concern you nor yourn, then take a fool's advice—an' move on."

"See here, Martin, if that's your name, don't borrow trouble about me. You're not my man. I don't want to know more than one thing, and that is where my man is. Then I don't want to do more than one thing. I want to lay sights on him. After that it's a matter between him and Killenquick, and the chances in Killenquick's favor."

"That's all right; but s'posin' 'your man' is one of my men—I want to know something about that; fur down here along Back Load Trail there's a few on us as hang together mighty close. Ef you get them double-sights pulled on some as I knows on, mebbe there'll be the like on you with a quicker finger on the trigger."

"Very well, old man, you know all I can tell you. My name is Winkle, and I'm laying out for my man. I've heard of Back Load Trail, and I've heard of Dick Martin that rules it. I'm an honest man and a square man, and I tell you there will be some fancy shooting done along here before long. If it's to be war between you and me let us know it now, and I'll play my hand careful. Remember, I'm not going to interfere with you except as I have to; but if so be that there's danger in the air for one of your friends, more's the pity."

"Ye'r' mighty indefinite, stranger. Ef you've ever heard of Back Load Trail, as ye say ye have, ye must know that outsiders that sometimes try to ring in here, occasionally git the'r last sickness. We run things down here to suit ourselves purty much, an' ef you've got a grudge ag'in' any one it's all right, so he's an outsider, too. But, ef it's ag'in' one of us Free Trappers, the bullet is already run that puts yer light out. I don't know of any strangers on this trail but yerself an' one more, an' he only come down from the mountains last night. Ef it's him, all right. Ef it ain't—look sharp. Ef it's me, but ye say it ain't, I'm here now!"

The voice of Dick Martin rolled out round and full as he uttered the words, "I'm here now:" there was even something heroic in his tone, just as there was a world of bitter warning in the first part of his address. But he seemed

to make little impression on his *vis-a-vis*, who looked at him steadily, and answered him coolly:

"I neither know nor care if the man I'm seeking is a Free Trapper, or whether he just came down from the mountains. I know I'm a dead shot, and I know I'll shoot him dead. When you find a corpse lying on the broad of its back, with its left eye shot out, you may calculate that my mission is accomplished, and that I'm done with this region. As for any threats you make, I care nothing for them, I fear for nothing, nothing can harm me. I am above all chances, for I am a minister of Fate, and until Fate has been served, the lead is not run nor the steel forged that can harm me."

"By heavens! ye'r' either a gritty man or ye'r' crazy. Ther's not many men stood up lately and talked that way to my face. I like pluck and I like grit, so I'm goin' to hold on a leetle longer till I see yer game. It's not often I take a likin', but I half like you. I come down here to where you were camped intendin' to do some plain talkin', but I've altered my mind a leetle on it. Turn in, stranger, Dick Martin bids ye good-night."

Something in Martin's voice gave evidence to the other of the sincerity of his words. Though, on their very faces, as much as from their conversation, you could plainly see their wide dissimilarity, yet Winkle's voice lost something of its hard, steely ring as he responded:

"Good-night, then. We understand each other pretty fairly. Watch my hand and you may see what I play. I don't think it's against your game, but if it is I say nothing against your doing your best. Each man for himself and—"

Whatever else the taller man was about to say was suddenly interrupted by a wild cry proceeding from the opposite side of the stream, a cry that startled both men. Martin dropped at full length upon the ground, while Winkle brought his rifle to a ready and gazed in the direction from whence came the sound.

The bushes which lined the bank seemed to be violently agitated, there was a noise as of two men engaged in a fierce and well-contested struggle. This lasted but for a few seconds, then a dark body shot out into the moonlight and fell into the water with a sullen splash.

Both men cast curious glances at the spot where the body had disappeared. Great waves circled out and out, but there was no further struggling, and for a time no sign of what was the object that had fallen into the stream. But at length, as the two spectators looked curiously at each other, there rose into the clear moonshine, that lay broad and silvery upon the surface of the water, the face of a dead man; while from his breast, as a center, there irradiated a crimson fluid that dyed the water with its stain.

Henry Winkle took a few steps forward and gazed anxiously at the body that was slowly drifting down with the current. Apparently he was satisfied, for he turned around with what might have been taken for a sigh of relief. But when his eye explored the little plateau it rested not on any living thing—Dick Martin had quietly glided away.

CHAPTER II.

AN APPARITION.

ALTHOUGH there was nothing in the sudden disappearance of Martin that could particularly alarm Winkle, impressed as he really was with the present good faith of the man with whom he had lately been conversing, still from some cause or other he felt by no means at his ease. Who might be upon the other side of the stream yet remained a mystery, and until that was solved he could not follow the advice lately tendered him and "turn in." He gave a quick glance up and down the stream, a sharp look at the bushes that lined the other shore, and then, with a quick, noiseless step, turned into the woods from which but a few moments before he had emerged.

It was his purpose to move up the stream for some little distance, and then, crossing over, beat carefully down the bank, keeping a lookout for traces of the parties whom he had no doubt had been engaged in a deadly struggle at the time the cry had interrupted his conversation.

It was not long before he found the trail most suddenly ended, for he came to a spot where the ground had been beaten and the branches and shrubs most evidently disarranged by a short but desperate contest. It was too dark for him to see if there were any traces of blood, but he had no doubt in his mind but that they were there. Carefully pushing aside the boughs, he saw that he was immediately on the bank, and in a position not only to see clearly the spot where he and Martin had met, but near enough to hear every word of what was then and there said. This much he noted, then turned aside to seek for further traces of the probable survivor.

Following a trail that is made carefully and with the intent of leaving no trace, is at best but slow business. At night it is infinitely worse. More than once in a dozen rods Winkle paused and scanned the ground narrowly. At length he pushed ahead, and on gaining the opposite bank, discovered the trail.

This was a discovery indeed, and, while feeling some little uneasiness, he felt more determined than ever to follow the trail and gain a sight of this mysterious stranger.

Under the shadow of the trees the traces grew more indistinct and were once more lost; but allowing himself to be led by instinct, he hurried on, with his rifle ready to swing to his shoulder at a moment's warning. A noise fell upon his ears and he halted. At some distance, and in the direction of down-stream, he heard horse's hoofs rapidly approaching, the animal, however, being evidently under the control of a rider.

This appeared to put a new aspect on matters, for, although it might be Martin, or a friend, the chances also were that it might be an enemy. Rapidly thrusting his hand in his bosom, Winkle drew therefrom a whistle, and placed it to his lips. A moment more and a sound peculiarly shrill and trilling arose on the air. Then the man bent forward in expectancy. Right ahead, at the distance of a dozen yards, sounded the neigh of a horse, followed by the noise of a plunge, and something that resembled the sudden fall of a heavy body. Then bursting through

the underbrush in answer to the call, came a noble white steed, that approached his master at a gallop and placed itself alongside of him. From the direction in which the animal had come might have been heard other sounds, but Winkle's whole attention was now given to the approaching rider. He stood with one hand outstretched, and resting on the neck of his horse, his eyes riveted on the open sward which, between the trees among which he stood, glittered and shone clear.

Behind him there was an exclamation, the sound of a struggle, and the voice of some one:

"Dar, now, dis chile has yer, suah! T'ink yer steal dat hoss, did yer?"

But at the same time a horse and rider flashed into the anxious sight of Winkle.

And that rider was a woman.

For just a moment were they visible, but that moment seemed sufficient to produce a terrible effect on the gazer. He threw up his hand and uttered a sharp, unearthly cry; his eyes eagerly followed the slight and graceful form that so easily swung in the saddle; bent forward he caught the last glimpse of her as her riding-dress fluttered away again and was lost in the infolding branches.

Then followed the sound of another horseman. Again a steed and rider glided across his plane of vision like a shadow on a curtain or a moving figure in some pantomime. For a moment only it appeared in view, and then disappeared in the same direction as did the woman.

Emotion was fairly overmastering Winkle. He shook like an aspen, his hands seemed to have lost their power; but hardly had the second figure disappeared when his rifle had found its way to his shoulder. But if he desired to use it with deadly effect, it was too late. Again stillness, and moonlight, and the nodding trees alone lay before him, while the retreating footsteps waxed fainter and fainter in the distance.

Mechanically he turned and pursued his way; he heard nothing, saw nothing—not even the dumb brute by his side, which faithfully paced along with a step corresponding in slowness with that of his master.

At length a huge rock or mass of rocks lay in his path. Moving a little to one side he soon skirted them, and as he did so, a light, as from a suddenly-stirred fire, flamed up before him, illuminating the side of the bowlder and a small circle in front of it.

Into this circle of light Winkle staggered, and with his rifle convulsively clutched at a ready, stood gazing with a half-dazed look into the fire.

CHAPTER III.

DOUBLY WARNED.

It was no particular feeling of fear that caused Martin to move away in so quiet a manner, while the struggle was going on upon the opposite side of the stream. But, as Winkle was to him a stranger, and there might be some need of investigation, he thought it best that whatever might be done, should be done by his own unaided exertions. Moving cautiously, keeping himself well under shade and waiting patiently, he saw the man, with whom he had been so lately conversing, look around with a gaze of half wonder at finding himself alone, and then

set forward upon an exploring tour. Not long afterward, at a point some distance down the stream, a man crossed; and, entering the woods, after a moment's hesitation, struck off in the direction in which Martin knew Winkle had camped, or intended to camp for the night. After a little, hard upon the trail came Winkle, himself. He would doubtless have followed on for the purpose of seeing the meeting between these two persons—if meet they should—when he was startled by the sudden appearance of the two riders. He, too, in a manner almost involuntary, threw his rifle to his shoulder and, in fact, had the pursuer fairly covered; but, instead of drawing the trigger, he lowered the weapon, listened a moment, and then, utterly disregarding the motions of the two men upon which he had been, but lately, so intent, followed silently on in the direction in which the woman and the pursuing man had disappeared.

A walk of a few minutes and the aspect of surrounding things somewhat changed—sufficiently at least to give token that some man or men had made a permanent settlement near by. The sound of galloping horses had ceased; as he advanced, he thought he heard voices engaged in conversation.

Nor was he mistaken. At some little distance from the edge of the wood stood a cabin. In front of this the parties had halted. The man was still mounted, but the woman stood by the threshold of the cabin, facing her late pursuer, a steely look of defiance upon her countenance.

The man was speaking when Martin came within hearing distance, and his words fell upon the night-air coldly and distinctly.

"Listen, Edith," he said. "You know me so well, that I need not tell you that sooner or later I will be heard. I have not come all these miles to have you put me off with a hand-wave, and a 'begone.' We are, both of us, older than when we last met and care little for listeners; but must I say now what I have to say, or will you accord me a more fitting time and place?"

"As between us, there never can be either a fitting time or place for communication. All connection, all intercourse between us has ceased, and forever. I would refuse to willingly hear you, if you came as a messenger announcing my eternal salvation, and nothing that you can say or do shall cause me to alter my determination. If you would be safe, leave me. I am willing to forgive the past, even if I cannot forget it, and I would not see you harmed; therefore I warn you away from these grounds. I caution you to return from whence you came, if you dare. And if you dare not, then seek some other place. Away, begone! for something tells me there is danger in the atmosphere for you here."

"Edith, again, I say, listen. I would speak somewhat of the past; but more of the future. Through me you have suffered, I admit, but through me I would have you return again—to joy and life and youth and love. I have much that I would tell you. I have sought you long and faithfully; for three long years I have followed constantly in your footsteps, but you have as constantly eluded me. Now I find you here and I must speak."

"Yes, you *have* followed in my footsteps for

three years, and for four, and for five. Through you I have suffered; but never thorough you did I or shall I sin. You overshadowed, you darkened my young life, made for me existence wretched, pursued me with a thousand unmanly and mean arts. Charles Endicott I tell you beware. I will not listen to you; I will not hear you. But I see trouble for you beyond, trouble black and deadly. Be advised before it is too late. I am no prophetess or soothsayer, but I tell you, sure as fate, if you linger here, you linger to meet your own death. Go your way then; I am dead to the world; I am dead to you."

"I know you, Edith, and I know your resolution; but, for all that, I will not go. I am ready to meet death when it comes, for I am one of those that believe the lot of man is fore-ordered, and no whining or flinching can avail aught; but rest assured I shall not die without a struggle. Let this fruitless talk come to an end, and let me, if you will not appoint a more favorable time, come to that of which I would speak."

The man called Charles Endicott grew more in earnest. With a rapidity and ease almost miraculous, he threw himself from his horse. So quick was he, and so graceful, that before the woman fairly knew it, he was standing near and facing her. She shrunk back somewhat, then raised her hand with a proud gesture.

"No nearer, sir, no nearer! Think not I am unprotected because you see me alone."

Endicott stood for a moment gazing silently into the eyes that met his, fair and full, glowing and sparkling under the moonlight. There was no quailing in them; no unsettledness of purpose, they did not fall. He sought to read her soul through them; and all he could see was unflinching resolution. Poor encouragement to proceed was that steady stare; a chill crept along his spine, a shiver went through his brain as he gazed into that face, handsome as a dream, but thin and colorless as chalk. Her eyes dilated; her form, lithe and slender, straightened; the proud gesture grew one of menace, and again her lips opened:

"Yes, sir, I am no unprotected female now. I hold your life in my hands in a dozen ways. Times have altered, sir. We stand on a new stage with new spectators and a new cast of parts. A man more or less, is of but little importance; your corpse, found with face turned upward would create little excitement among who might learn of it. Perhaps they might bury it; maybe they would leave that duty to the wolves. Who knows?"

Endicott's face darkened, for the tone of the woman's voice had a disdainful ring that cut into his pride like the needle-points of a tattooer. There was sharp pain and an ugly picture left behind. He tried to smile at her earnestness, but it was a very dismal smile, and his courage dropped away down toward zero. Not that he feared death—he only found that he feared the woman!

"Death's-heads and thigh-bones! Run out the black flag if you choose, yet there will many a day pass before I walk the plank. I see no vision of sudden death, feel no premonition of approaching dissolution."

"Laugh if you will at my warning; yet, as you stand there in the full moonlight, you make a fair target; and on my honor you stand this minute covered by more than one weapon of death. You doubt me? Well, I see a rifle-barrel aimed at your head by the hand of a man who never yet missed his mark. I see it gleaming, and a wave of my hand brings the leaden messenger. So go your way; if you remain here five minutes longer, so help me Heaven, I will see you shot down with as little mercy as I would a prowling coyote."

How or exactly where she disappeared, Endicott scarcely knew. A mist appeared to sweep across his eyes, and when the mist rolled away she was gone. He stared a moment blankly before him, with the words of her warning ringing in his ears, and a doubt as to what to do in his heart.

"Shot as a prowling coyote!" Faith, she is in one of her tragic moods to-night, and I verily believe she would do as she says. She may speak truly too about some one lying in wait; this is a queer region here, and if all accounts be true, a bullet from behind a bush would be no unprecedented thing. I will find my way back to camp as best I can. But how came she here?"

While muttering these things to himself he remounted his horse, turned his head in the direction from which he had come and slowly and thoughtfully began to retrace his steps.

As he passed from the clear space into the wood the animal he bestrode gave a start, which, while it caused no particular emotion in the heart of the rider, was still sufficient to make him look warily around. He thought he saw a gleaming and a glancing some little distance off; he imagined he could hear the tread of some one approaching. He was right in his thought, and in his imagination. The gleaming and glancing were the moonbeams shivering off of the long rifle, and the noise of footsteps announced the approach of Dick Martin.

Endicott at first sight of the man had thrown his hand warily in search of a weapon. But, almost instantly recognizing the man, he suffered it to drop by his side, and, reining in his horse, awaited the issue of the interview which he foresaw was about to ensue.

When Martin was within a few feet he paused, and the two gave a look at each other as though they would read the man confronting to the very soul.

It was Endicott who first broke the silence. He urged his steed onward a few paces, bent down in his saddle and extended his hand, at the same time exclaiming:

"Then it is you, Martin. I had half-suspected as much when I first caught sight of you, and it gave me a shock. We meet as friends, I hope?"

Martin remained standing unmoved, and as though he did not see the proffered hand, and answered, in a cool, careless tone:

"Yes, Endicott, it is I—no more, and no less. I know you've got nerves that are tolerably steady, so I won't show any wonder at your taking this meeting so coolly; but it's kind of unexpected. You've drifted a long way out of your latitude to be floating along Back Load

Trail. What's wrong in the East? Are the fools all dead, are the geese not worth the plucking, have the sheep come short in the wool crop, that you come here? Or are you in a stream that sets to the gold-diggings?"

"Bah, don't talk to me about the fools, geese and sheep that I've left behind me! Tell me how it is here. You and I used to understand each other pretty well, ay, and each other's secrets; so, come now; what's the best news in this heaven-forsaken region? Dick Martin doesn't locate here for nothing."

"No, he ain't located here for nothing; you're right. That something happens to be necessity. My luck in my little speculations ran out first, and I had to leave. As to what I'm doing here—that's not to be talked about. Maybe prospecting for gold; maybe Injun trading; maybe putting daylight through stray travelers and vamping with their traps; maybe any or all of these things—but not likely. I ain't here for nothing. That's all I can say."

"Martin, we have done business together many a time; we were allies, if not friends, and I want to know how the case stands now. I don't want to pry and peer into your private affairs. Maybe I'd be bringing something to the light that wouldn't stand it so well; but, I've heard somewhat of you as I came in this direction. Of course I didn't know it was you I heard the talk about, and of course there is a chance of what I heard being either true or false, with a little extra weight on the truth. You remember how we separated, and I don't think you have anything to complain of, or any charges of ill faith on my part to bring against me. Now, the question I want to ask is: Can we rely on each other as we could of old? A plain yes or no will make the best answer to the question."

"Well, Endicott, I haven't heard of you particularly, either good or bad, though I had an intimation that you were in the neighborhood. It makes no difference what reports have gone trailing toward the East, and I don't claim to know them: they're bad enough, no doubt. You ask me a question, and if you must have an answer, why all I can say is: In some things, yes, in other things, no! Will that suit you, or shall I go ahead and explain?"

"What do you mean by yes?"

"I mean that, in the first place, I would rely on you just as much as I ever did, and not a particle more. In the second, whatever you get my word to, that you can depend on my carrying through; but if you think to find me ready to promise to any and every mad scheme, you are very much mistaken."

"Anything that is honest, eh?"

A grim smile flitted over Martin's face at the mention of the word honest. It was gone in a moment, though, and he proceeded:

"Yes, anything that's honest. Now, what is it that you have to propose? I don't suppose you would have made so much of an introductory if you had not had something behind it."

"You are partly right. My motto is business first and pleasure afterward, else I would have had a thousand things to say with regard to our mutual lives in the past few years. Yet I hardly know what I would say. I did not seek you;

yet, since I have met you, I want to know if I can count upon your assistance in a little matter which, springing up suddenly, has found me unprepared to meet it."

"Then you didn't hunt up Black Load Trail for any special reason?"

"No, indeed! It is just my lucky chance. The party I am with are camped half a mile over yonder. I left them from no very definable reason, and thereby met with an adventure that may have a great influence on my actions, perhaps on my whole future life. When we camped over there by the side of the stream, I thought it was but for the night, now I may linger in this neighborhood for a day or so. The question is, if I need a friend will you stand behind me?"

"What's this adventure, and how do you want me to stand behind you? If what I think is true, you may have more need of it than you think for."

"Well, Martin, I scarce know in what manner I would have you aid me; perhaps, after all, only by a neutrality. As to the adventure—I met with a woman."

There seemed to be nothing either astonishing or disconcerting in this revelation. After waiting in unbroken silence for any remarks that Martin might feel inclined to make, Endicott proceeded:

"It was rather strange for a man to ride out of camp with no aim or object, and to stumble upon a woman; stranger, too, when that woman chanced to be one whom you had known long before, and for whom you had been long searching, and in vain. I do not know what may come of it; but I know what I want to. How is it? There is no one of our little party that I care to trust—if I need assistance within the next twenty-four hours, will you give it, and where can I find you?"

Martin looked up slowly and deliberately.

"It seems to me you're putting things on their old basis, what one of us plans the other is to help carry through."

"Why not? Neither you nor I have grown what the world calls better since then, and of course the understanding would be now as it always was—nothing for nothing, all for whatever pays."

"No, I don't suppose we have grown much better; but there may have been a few changes. As to the woman you speak of, here is all I have to say. If you have any plans and can carry them out openly and aboveboard, no force, no underhanded means, no fraud, I'll not lay a straw in your way; maybe I can help you."

"If not?"

"This. Just you attempt the slightest bit of compulsion, or the first grain of trickery—try anything that's not honest, make a move toward abduction, or take a step toward foul play, and I'll lay you dead in your tracks."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say. I give you fair leave and fair warning, too. I don't intend to interfere in anything she wishes to do, but I mean she shall not do what she doesn't want to do."

"Do you mean to say that you will exert any control over her actions?"

"Yes, just so far as to let her have her own

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will. She's one of the few persons that I have cared for, and when time stops and the sea gives up its dead, you may, *perhaps*, see me go back on my dead sister's daughter."

CHAPTER IV.

BILL BLAZE, THE "SNOLLIGOSTER."

AT the very edge of the camp-fire lay two men, mutually clutching each other, although hostile operations seemed, for the nonce, to have been suspended. So near to the fire were they that one of them, without relaxing his hold, had been able to give a log thereon a rousing kick which had caused the light to flare up, thus enabling him to obtain a fair view of the other. As Harry Winkle staggered into the circle of light the two men loosened their grips, and with deliberation rose to their feet, one of them returning to its sheath a knife, the other dropping to the ground a hatchet.

"A'mighty Moses, but yer kim neah gittin' a crack across yer skull. What yer want to steal dat hoss fur—eh?"

"Pompey, there were a nigger nigh onto goin' under about two minnits ago, an' so yer had better not be axing fool's questions. How d'yer s'pose I knowed whose hoss that war? The durned red niggers cleaned me out, root an' branch, 'bout a week ago, an' cum clost to rizin' my ha'r. I've bin trampin' on the back trace, an' when I cum acrost a animile handy I wouldn't 'a' bin Bill Blaze ef I hadn't gone fur him—'special arter what I met to-night. What yer doin' here? Last time I see'd yer yer war on the Big Red with Cap Le Compte."

"Hi! You t'ink so! Somebody mite 'a' bin hurt ef I hadn't 'a' knowed it was you when you talk; but dunno 'bout it's bein' dis chile. I's not bin with dem Hudson Bay fellers sence dat winter when you got so bad bit up wid dat grizzly. I's on my own hook now, an' takin' care o' Mass'r Winkle. An' bress my soul, dar he am now!"

The speaker, who was an African of the unmitigated breed, caught sight of Winkle standing on the opposite side of the fire.

"Mass'r dis yer am Mister Bill Blaze. I knows 'um well, an' he's a fu'st-rate feller, ef he war a-goin' fur yer hoss. Nussed him up when he war tore all into leetle bits."

Winkle appeared to be somewhat recalled to life by this address of his sable attendant; and turning, looked the man thus recommended full in the face.

Blaze, once introduced, did not stand upon ceremony; but advanced across the intervening space, extending his hand as he walked.

"Yes, siree, I'm that identikle individool, Bill Blaze, jist frum the mountings! I kin trap more beaver, eat more buffler, steal more hoss-flesh an' raise more top-knots than any man frum here to the Columby River. I'm a blarsted bull-dorg an' a high-beeled snolligoster. I kin lick my weight in b'ar's meat, an' my name's Bill Blaze. Waugh!"

"I've heard that name before," said Winkle, taking the offered hand, "and you're welcome. I'm a little abroad just now, and don't feel like my own self—for I've seen a ghost."

"Thunder! You look kinder skeery; but ghosts ain't nothin'. I've seen more ghosts than

any man a-trampin'. Had 'em for pards onc't. Fact. Three on 'em an' myself camped in a shanty down on Black-horn Lick fur nigh onto a month. There war a woman with her throat cut, an' a half-breed with his brains stove in, an' his skulp a-danglin' ahind, an' a black b'ar with his back bruk. The way they tore around that 'ere shanty war nasty. Why, down thar on that thar Lick, ghosts war as plenty as ha'rs in yer head. An' yell! The catamounts got so 'shamed of their own mule music they packed their trapsacks an' got. Yer couldn't find a painter nigher ner fifty mile. No, stranger; don't talk to Bill Blaze about ghosts, fur he's bin thar!"

Winkle appeared to be little moved by this address. His face still bore marks of evident perturbation, and there was an absence of mind depicted in his manner and actions that seemed to strike Blaze as rather unwarranted. To some remark made he answered rather shortly; but he accepted of the hospitalities offered him, so far at least as to seat himself by the fire, and, in default of other entertainment, entertained himself by the sound of his own voice.

"No, ghosts don't bother this byar boss. Nor red-skins nor grizzlies neither. I kin trap more beaver, kill more b'ar, shoot straighter, run quicker, jump further, lie faster, stampede more animiles, an' carry more pelts than any bloody bull-dorg ever invented. But, I'm the man without luck. I've wrastled with the old boy fur thirty years; he's got an under holt on me; but, I'm dead game, I am! Luck or no luck, I'll hang like seventeen pair o' tongs and a last inch game-cock. Waugh!"

The negro listened to these announcements, if Winkle did not. He was accustomed to this style of thing and had heard Blaze before.

"Mass'r Blaze, 'pears to me de bad luck ain't so mitey bad; I's t'inkin' it's t'oder way cl'ar. Any udder man 'ud bin gone under—dun gone suah—ef he'd had de half what you's had to go tru. You's allers a-sayin' you's nary luck, an' allers a-gittin' inter de wu'stest kind o' skrim-digers—an' still you am heah. What's de trouble now?"

"Wal, Pomp, I allow it's no luck as pulls me through, but just pure grit and muskle in this huyer hoss. I war camped out in a bully old spot last week; meat plenty, beaver to be had for the taken of 'em, and everything going along on a string. Didn't think thar was Injin within twenty mile, an' blast me, ef they didn't cum down an' clear us out quicker than the jerk of a dead deer's tail. Bob Short an' I war thar together, you see, an' Bob struck all right, but they got my old sorrel mare, an' all our provender, an' I just cum down from them are mountings after a chase o' four days, poorer ner Job's turkey, an' nothen left me but Slicer an' this huyer old shootin'-iron. An' this huyer very blessed night, as I were movin' along promisc'us, thar war a rifle-ball went sizz a-past my head-piece, an' I squatted an' see'd two men a-talkin', an' found that thar bit o' lead warn't meant fur me, an' while I war a-listenin', sock cum somethin' right acrost me, an' hove a yell wuss ner forty catamounts fitin' in a small box. I know'd it war a copper-belly an' clinched. We hed it, pull an' hug a bit, an' then I got

Slicer out. That thar red-skin won't cum a-pryin' an' a-peerin' down along Back Load Trace soon ag'in. Nary; not much; waugh!"

The story of the trapper began to interest Winkle; he thought less and less of the ghost; he descended from the clouds and listened with earnestness to what the man was saying. He thought of the corpse that Martin and he had seen drifting down the stream, and believed that the Indian would *not* come prying and peering in that neighborhood soon again. Perhaps, too, this man might be of service to him? At any rate it would do no harm to meet him cordially.

"Then you are the man who had the tussle over there with an Indian? I heard the yell, saw him shoot into the stream, and went across to see what it was about. I was following your trail, when I came across a sight, or rather a sight came across me, that unknined my nerves. But, how came the difficulty with the Indian? What was he doing there? Is there danger from others that should be specially guarded against?"

"Yes, siree, I'm the man! The diffikilty perobably arove from his not keepin' both eyes peeled. He was so bent on hearin' that he couldn't take time to see, an' tumbled onto a hornet's nest. He clinched right in then by instink, an' as it war die dorg er eat the hatchet, I hed to let it into him, though I'd as ruther not. What he was a-doin' I dunno. Injin deviltry are various. Thar oughtn't to been a red-skin within fifty miles o' huyer. Thar may be a couple more on 'em or thar mayn't. What they'd be arter I can't say. Martin ought to know'd ef thar war any, an' I guess he's got his men out by this time a-lookin'."

"It will be best then to keep a bright lookout?"

"'Twouldn't be onsensible. Leastwise, though I don't think thar's much danger, it won't hurt to keep one eye open, for I've found it don't altogether gee right to be too confiding in this section with anybody—white er red. I'd advise it. I'd advise it, partick'ler, arter the talk I heard between you an' Martin. You see, I hain't any doubt but what yer a good man an' a game man; but, supposin' he was to tell it to some o' his cronies around here, an' one on 'em should be the man ye'r' after—I wouldn't put it apast 'em to slip in here an' slide a few inch o' steel in somewhar nigh yer jug'lar."

Winkle meditated some little time before he responded; then his words dropped out slowly and distinctly.

"I am safe from anything in that shape. It is no mere bravado on my part when I say so, but a belief so settled that it must be true. I bear a charmed life while that one other man lives. I have passed through all straits during the past three years, and from desperate encounters have come forth unharmed; from beds of deadly sickness have come up sound and well. I have changed in that time wonderfully, and the change was not for naught. I do most firmly believe that destiny has something in store for me; till to-night I thought I knew what it was. Now I am uncertain; but that it is something more than a stab in the back or a chance shot in the *melee* of a night attack I have no doubt."

"That's all right. I only give my 'pinion on the matter, seein' as may be I've tramped around here ruther more nor you hev. Jest keep yer weather eye open—you an' Pomp here is all I mean. And ef anything *should* turn up while I'm in shooting distance, yer kin kalkerlate that Bill Blaze'll give yer a hint on it."

"Well, well," responded Winkle, "I am not likely to have much dealings with any one hereabouts; but I begin to think my intentions have deceived me. I have been lingering in this neighborhood for several days; but I will do so no longer. To-morrow I will move on westward—and perhaps, if you have nothing better, you could find it to your interest to go along."

"That's my identikle name—Moovin'-west Blaze. But I'm steerin' in toward the settlements to see if thar's anybody sich a blarsted fool as to trust me fur an outfit. The season's jist commencing, an' ef I hev anything like nateral luck I kin pay 'em back when I cum in ag'in and hev a few pelts in my sack."

"I can arrange that matter, I think," responded Winkle. "I have an extra horse, and, in fact, nearly everything you need. I was going on to the trapping-grounds. Suppose you remain with me a couple days, and if nothing turns up I will leave this region. If I should, however, accomplish any of my aims, you shall have what you need anyhow."

"Durn my Trojan! I'm your man. I kin put in a week here, easy. Hev yer seen Martin's headquarters yit? If yer hev'n't yer ought to call in on him."

"No; I didn't know that I was so near to it. I have been near here for some days—within ten or twelve miles perhaps—but I only came into camp here to-night."

"Yer must go in then. Some on 'em nosed ye out long ago, an' if yer don't they may come playin' tricks on yer without sayin' anything to Dick. Maybe ye kin git some hints of what yer arter down thar."

"You are right. It may be as well to look a little in that direction. I've hardly been systematic in my plan of procedure. That comes, though, of trusting to chance and drifting in the direction Fate seems to call me. And, by the way, are there any females with the party?"

"Wal, to-morrer morning early will be time enuff to talk it over. I'm goin' to turn in now and git a snooze. I've had a blarsted long tramp to-day, and them legs o' mine ain't exactly a steam injine—though," by way of a saving clause, and to prevent the idea of any derogatory admission, "I'm a bloody, blarsted bull-dog and a high-beeled snolligoster on wheels."

To make arrangements for the night occupied but a short time; and soon, wrapped in a blanket of Winkle's, Blaze was wooing

"Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,
Chief nourisher in life's feast,"

while silence and darkness reigned around.

CHAPTER V.

THE SCREAM AT NIGHT.

How long Blaze had been slumbering he could scarcely have even guessed; but suddenly,

and without any assignable cause, he found himself wide awake. He saw nothing but dim shadows, heard nothing but the regular breathing of the two sleepers by his side. Yet his first thought was of danger. He was accustomed to premonitions. Men who live in an atmosphere of peril meet with them, understand them, act on them.

He leisurely and thoughtfully unrolled himself from his blanket and arose to his feet. "Most durn queer," he soliloquized, turning his eyes in every direction. "This old hoss's narves must be gittin' weak, er thar's sumthin' wrong a-brewin'. Don't often feel this here way; last time I did, was t'other night, when the copperbellies was a-cumin' in onto us without words er warnin'. I'll jist scout around a bit, an' see if ennythin's broke loose."

Taking his rifle with him, the trapper noiselessly stole away from the vicinity. He moved around the camp in a gradually increasing circle, pausing but once in his pace, and that was when he was opposite to the point where he believed Martin's cabin lay. Full ten minutes passed, when he heard footsteps and the voices of men engaged in conversation. Sinking upon the ground at the foot of the tree by which he was standing, Blaze watched and waited.

Both men were strangers to him; but one of them already has been introduced to the reader, under the name of Endicott. He had had time to leave Martin and meet with another man, who seemed a friend; and to him was imparting information, both as to what had already occurred that night in the vicinity of Black Load Trace, and as to what might occur. His words, that spoke of violence and treachery, appeared to fall upon sympathizing ears. As they drew nearer, all the time becoming more deeply interested in their conversation, Blaze gave a start of surprise and recognition; he crouched closely in the shadow and listened with redoubled interest.

Charles Endicott has been already described, and his companion merits notice. He, too, differed in something from the class of men one naturally expects to find on the very outer verge of semi-civilization. He was a man of perhaps thirty-five years of age, of medium height. He walked with a steady, stealthy, cat-like pace, his head, for the most part, bent down; but now and then it was lifted, and he cast a sharp, steady gaze around him. The features were firmly cut, the eyes were steady; yet an undescribable something seemed to be shifting across his face, which would say to a stranger: Beware of Eben Rothven!

"Yes, Eben, it does make a change in the programme, I'll admit, but, it's a change to the advantage of both. Don't you see that?"

"I see that we waste here a couple of weeks, and no one knows what the end of it all will be. You can't count on a woman, and especially such a woman as you say this is. You think you can waken the old dream in her, do you? Why, man, I'm surprised at you! The deadest thing on the earth is a dead love, and there is no mending a broken idol. Take my advice and let her go."

"You're welcome to your philosophy about dead idols and the like; welcome to shake your

head and prophesy; but what I want is your help. Of course I will get it in some shape or other, but I prefer it to be freely and enthusiastically given."

"How much does my help enter into your calculations? I tell you frankly that I am none of your dashing adventurers, ready to ride into Martin's camp of Free Trappers. So far as a word of advice and a sacrifice of time goes, you may count on me; but don't expect me to stand behind you, to assist in any mad experiment you see proper to try."

"My 'count' is upon your services as a reverend—a title and authority that, as far as you and I know, is still legitimately borne. I want to use you; a piece of joinery of your handiwork will last for all time. The woman is worth her weight in gold; and, besides, it's no new dream with me. It's not so many years since she was an idol of mine."

"Yes, I've heard of it—and I think, too, that you handled it—or would have handled it—not over tenderly. Do you think she would forgive that?"

"That was no fault of mine. I would have done better if the Fates had let me; but they were against me. What could I do, hedged in as I was? If I could have sunk my past record and stood out a new man, I'd not have let 'e'en the winds of Heaven visit her face too roughly."

"There is a limit, you may find, to human credulity. You cannot wash out the recollections of the past. Do you think it was any light cause that drove her out of the world, out of society, refinement and all that women of her stamp hold dear? Every day she has spent here, every rude face and lonely hour that she has seen or felt, has cried out against you. Why, man, you murdered her name, and that is a crime no woman could ever forgive!"

Endicott was silent a moment before the impressiveness of his companion. Then, by an effort, he said:

"Of course, what you say may be true as holy writ. But what of it? Fair means or foul—I don't mince matters. This is no new plan of mine, and so, when opportunity comes, I can decide on my course quickly. Delay never makes a man. The time for action has come. Are you with me?"

The man called Rothven hesitated a moment, as if weighing the matter in his mind; then answered, simply:

"I am."

"Come on, then," and the two left the spot.

Much of this conversation was Greek to Blaze, but somehow he got it in his head that it related to his new-made friend, Harry Winkle. He seated himself leisurely against the tree to think it all over. Both these conspirators were strangers to him; they did not belong to Martin's men; who were they? He might, perhaps, have learned more as to that by following them, but he neglected to do so. And, pondering over the thing, he must have fallen asleep, for consciousness faded away. For how long, he could not at once, perhaps, have told, but he came back to life with a sudden shock, that brought him upon his feet like the thrill of a strong galvanic battery. He was awakened by a woman's scream,

long, shrill, cutting into, and through his ears like an Indian's death-wail.

He listened to catch it again, but it was not repeated. For a moment all was silence; then he heard the steady beat of horses' hoofs stretching away at fullest gallop, and then, the sharp, quick report of a rifle. He heard the footsteps coming nearer and nearer, and he crouched in the shadow of the tree, with his hand upon the lock of his weapon, almost nervously waiting for whatever might follow.

Suddenly he felt a hand laid upon his shoulder. He started, and turned with a quick motion of offense. It was Winkle, rifle in hand. The moonlight fell past the tree full upon his face, on which was an excited if not a wild look.

"Am I crazy to-night? or did you hear it, too? I've seen a ghost this night, and now, again, I heard it scream for help. What was it, Blaze?"

This he hurriedly asked.

"If ye'r' a lunatic, there's a pair on 'em, fur I heard it, too. Lay low here a minnit, an' you'll see some more on it."

The hoof-beats sounded nearer; they swept on and on toward them. Then three horses emerged from the trees out into the light, and neared the spot where the two men were concealed.

"Is it he?" whispered Winkle, hissing the words out between his clinched teeth, and with a sharp click the hammer of his rifle went back.

But Blaze, quickly reaching back, seized his arm.

"Hold hard, there's more ner he thar."

The horsemen raced by like a tornado. It was a party of Blackfeet! And across the saddle-bow of the savage nearest to Blaze, was flung, or held, the form of a woman! In a moment Winkle's eye had caught sight of that which Blaze had perceived—the woman. For a moment he seemed to lose all control of himself, all power for action. Just one glimpse of a white, wild face, and a hand clutching fiercely.

"Did you see it—did you see it?" he asked.

"Yes! I seen it! They've just went an' gone an' done it. Thar's grit in them red-skins, thar are. But you'll be able to see another corpse along Black Load Trail afore many hours. Dick Martin will be behind 'em in the shake of a buck's tail—Hello! What's bu'sted?"

The man by his side had sunk, stiff and motionless, upon the grass.

"Blast my tail-feather, ef the young cuss hain't fainted. Thar must be somethin' *wrong* in the upper story, sure!"

CHAPTER VI.

A DOUBLE TRAIL.

ON the prairie, alone by moonlight, there is a lonesome solemnity that startles, appalls. Look in one direction. For miles and miles there stretches away a tract of rolling land where the grass grows, the buffaloes graze, the coyotes howl, but no human form can be seen, no tree waving—a loneliness of nature that you think must somehow of necessity be interminable. Turn and look in another. Down from the table-land there stretches a long, grassy slope, where the foliage is more than ordinarily luxuriant, and at the foot of the declivity is the

long line of timber which marks the course of some stream. There the broad elm flourishes, the lofty cottonwood shoots upward, and the white sycamore trees stand gleaming ghostlike under the mellow moonlight. Perhaps, further away to the left, where the rich bottom is broken by rising ridges of rocky bluffs, you see the gloomy spread of the cedar tree reaching upward its dismal-looking arms. Wherever the rolling prairie-fires have been unable to sweep, there you see the shade of timber and bush; everywhere else is the blue and red stem, the blue and bunch-grass or the short, crisp buffalo-grass; and far off in the distance, with a quiet grandeur of its own, you see the trace-line of the mountain range.

Some such grand and lonely scene would the reader have noted had he been standing in some favorable position on the high prairie near Back Load Trace, a few moments before the occurrence of the incidents just detailed.

It can well be imagined that Blaze was not the only one startled into action by the occurrences of the night. The shot, by one of Dick Martin's men on guard, aroused the Free Trappers, and also caused Charles Endicott and his companions the keenest alarm. Had their destined prey been seized by other human wolves? If so—who were those wolves?

As for Blaze he lost but little time. Almost herculean in strength, he gathered on one arm the two rifles, while with the other he bore Harry toward the camp. On the way he met the negro, who relieved him of the rifles, and, upon reaching the side of the now smoldering camp-fire, produced a bottle of spirits and a canteen of water.

It was but a short time until consciousness returned to the fainting man. He opened his eyes, raised himself, sat upright, looked Blaze full in the face.

"You saw it all, did you? Now tell me, who was that woman?"

"That bit o' caliker, mister, tho' I dunno as I ever seen it afore, war most likely a woman that Dick Martin claims a sort o' relationship to, an' she's bin livin' round hyar fur some considerable time. Frum yer ackshuns I'd think yer must hev hed a priur morgidge on it, an', ef so, ye'd better be up an' stirrin', fur by the mitey the durned Blackfoot is goin' to foreclose."

"Ready, quick, quick," was Winkle's terse answer, looking from one man to the other. Then he turned, and burying his face in his hands lay stretched for a moment prone. When he sprung to his feet there was a new light in his eye, and redoubled strength in his arm. He vaulted into his saddle, gathered up his reins, and turning to Blaze, in a firm-set whisper, muttered:

"Lead on—to life or death—but I must see her again."

So, fully armed and fairly equipped, the three men rode out from under the shadows and cast themselves, with clinched teeth and iron will, upon the trail. All this took but a few moments to accomplish, since the three men had within them, each separately, the highest development of trained sagacity.

As they came out upon the prairie, Blaze took a sweeping glance around him, as though he

would fain impress upon his mind every minutiae of the lay of the country.

"Dog-gone the'r hides, thar's just two routes for 'em, an' on'y two, to take, an' ef I know'd which one it war it's cussed leetle trailin' I'd do to-night. In this yere leetle game it takes too much eye-pullin' to run nose-down. It ain't accordin' to reason to s'pose we won't hev to look out fur all the cussed red-skin tricks ever invented. They've got one on me a'ready due, so ef I don't squar' with 'em afore beaver-pelts is prime, I hope I may never tote a trapsack, er p'izen a buffler-wolf ag'in."

This was said more in the manner of a soliloquy than of a direct address; in fact, it is doubtful if either of the others could have heard his low-toned words. Winkle meant work; and so, for the present, thought little of speaking or of listening. Blaze meant work, too; but, talk to him was second nature, and when there were no ears open to hear he would rather press his own into service than, no pressing emergency demanding it, keep silent. Having a full twenty minutes' start, they reached the spot where Martin and men had first been at fault long in advance of those worthies, and, as they had not a third trail to confuse them, and perhaps being more trail-wise, Bill did not have to spend many minutes in finding the tracks left by the two parties of Indians.

"One on each route, by mitey! Now, which to foller?"

He gave both the benefit of a close scouting. On the one leading to the right he found the imprint of a horse's hoof which he recognized as having been with the abductors. He noticed, too, that one was double laden. After a bit he came upon some shreds of a woman's dress. He showed these marks to Winkle, being careful, for the benefit of Martin, whom he shrewdly suspected would follow hard after, to leave them untouched. Harry's heart bounded more buoyantly at sight of these indications, and Blaze took one more look around him before all three dashed on with redoubled energy. But, as the trail at length lay before them plain and undisguised, Blaze's enthusiasm suddenly fell away down below zero. From time to time he glanced at it and at length reined in his horse.

"Dog-gone my knock-kneed tail-feather," he exclaimed, "I ain't fit to lead blind rabbits to water!"

Winkle looked at him in astonishment.

"What is the matter now. Why do you halt?"

But Blaze paid but little attention to his query.

"What a gaul-blasted fool this hyar old hoss are. Tuk right in the fu'st pop by a bit o' baby-play. Can't yer see? That gal couldn't 'a' tore them hits off o' her dress. It stan's to reason not, sure. Why, cuss 'em, thar's two Injuns ridin' double here, dead shot. I thort it was too soft a thug. That led hoss in t'other party is the one ez has the gal on. Jist seen it in time. I'd gamble high thar's ez purty a leetle hornets' nest a-hangin' under the fu'st bit o' timber we'd come to ez you'll find from hyar to the Big Red."

How this suggestion was received may well be imagined.

"What are we to do then?" queried Harry. "Must we go all the way back and start fresh on the other trail?"

"Wal, not quite that bad; but somewhere blamed nigh. Change my hind-sights, ef they ain't a-strikin' fur Crooked Canyon, full drive—we're goin', from the taste I've had of the hosses, to be jist a little too late to see 'em git under kiver."

"You think you can find them yet, though?"

"Think! I know it. Thar ain't no trouble about that; thar's only two trails, an' like a blarsted green purp, I've bin a-barkin' up the wrong one."

"Then the sooner we look for the right one the better."

"That's so, only it's provokin to hev bin losin' all this time. Come on now, an' ef ever an arrer went straight—an' the copper-skins kin sling 'em nasty, I kin take yer to the spot whar they're headin' fur to-night. I've bin ham-strung an' sot down on, which ain't very lively for the boys!"

Without more hesitation or further parley, Blaze turned to the left and led off at a rate which he judged best suited to continued effort. Not for a long time did he utter a word. But when the silence had begun to be monotonous he broke it by bringing his hand down with violence upon his thigh, exclaiming:

"Cussed ef sand-paper ain't slick as grease alongside o' this streak o' roughness. Won't some one draw a bead on me afore I get my ha'r cut fur nuthin'?"

"Why, what is the trouble now? I hope we are not at fault again?" anxiously remarked Winkle.

"No, we ain't; but it's three to one an' fifty cents a dozen but what Dick Martin an' his boys are. I war so bloody, blarsted particular to leave everything es I found it, and when they come up, like es not they'll just skyugle straight along on our trail, an' so they're losin' time, an' maybe get tuk in, when we mout just as well as not all be layin' on that trail together. It's too late to fix her now, so here goes."

Winkle's momentary uneasiness having been allayed, the three rode rapidly but moodily on.

CHAPTER VII.

LARIAT DAN'S DISCOVERY.

WE have said that the shot which Blaze and Winkle heard had also aroused Endicott and his party. Lariat Dan, a trailer, trapper and guide of the party, and whose experience had been immense, and whose word could not be doubted, said that he had heard, in addition, a woman's scream for help. At this, as it were by instinct, Endicott and Rothven looked at each other. Could it be that the woman of whom they had been conversing but a short time ago had since been in mortal danger? Endicott wondered, too, whether the conversation he had with Martin had anything to do with it, or if some sudden peril had come to the girl as she wandered, as of old, beneath the moonlight? Then Grizzly Dave, a voyageur of some renown, and also of his party, said that he "smelt Injun," and thereat Endicott hastily gave orders for an immediate preparation for a quick move. Accordingly there was a bustle and buzz around the

camp for a few minutes, every man with nervous rapidity attending to his duty.

By the time that Martin and half a score or more of his trusty followers foamed into Endicott's camp, everything was in a condition that spoke well for the training and agility of the small brigade. So ready, too, were Endicott's company for defense, that more than one saddle of the Free Trappers might have been emptied as they came charging up had not Lariat Dan been acute enough to distinguish the thunder of their horses from the sweep of Indian ponies, and informed Endicott of the number and quality of their approaching visitors. In a moment it seemed to him that he had caught by intuition a glimpse of the position of affairs, and he confronted Martin so earnestly, that that worthy's suspicions as to foul play emanating from that camp were at once dispelled.

"Now, then, ef ye'r' man enough to follow Dick Martin, you've a chance to ride behind him. Ther's been some carelessness to-night that'll cost more than the sleepy cusses' brains are worth. Jump into the saddle if you're ready. What you leave in camp is safe as a church, and come on. The red-skin rascals sha'n't get clear without hard riding and harder fighting."

"What is it? Out with the whole of it! We heard the shot and scream, and got ourselves together for anything rough that might turn up."

"Come on. I can tell you everything as we go. That fool of a girl has been gobbled up by the copper-skins, and that when I had six good men out for them. She'll be fifty miles away up in the mountains by morning."

The truth, as it was spoken rapidly by Martin, stirred Endicott into instantaneous action.

"Never mind cacheing the dunnage, I'll bear the damage. Is everything ready for a start?" he exclaimed.

"You can just gamble on that yere!" was the response of Lariat Dan.

"Then mount and away. Twenty-five dollars apiece extra pay for the extra work, and everything else goes on the same!"

"That's the right ring! Count us boys in on this yere frolic—up and git!" said Dan.

Endicott's followers fell in with those of Martin, and the whole body swept rapidly away, Martin, some yards in advance, heading toward the trail of the Indians, which passed the camp not many yards distant. These few yards were soon traversed, and, with scarce an effort, the trail was found. There it lay before them, fresh, full and deep. As they ranged upon it, Endicott drew up to the leader. At the pace they were going, a free, steady gallop, conversation could be held with perfect ease, and he wished to gather the particulars of the catastrophe as well as learn the probable result.

"It seems to me the girl is born to be the center of a mix, and just lives to make and be in trouble. I've got the whole thing down to a point now—might have seen it at once if I hadn't had my ideas turned off thinking of what you had been saying to me to-night. What there is in her white face and staring eyes I

can't see; but she's bewitched a dozen or so, and in the lot there's a red-skin that's been into my camp two or three times in the last year. That red-skin has made the difficulty now."

"Then there's little danger of her coming to any immediate harm?"

"Not so much if they don't tomahawk her as we catch up."

"But will we catch up? What are the chances?"

"Will we? You talk as though you had never done business before with Dick Martin. Of course we will! What he puts his hand to goes through. That's what has made him out here. We *must* catch up. The scent is fresh, our cattle good, and if we let them get away from us into the mountains, we ought to lose our hair before we get back. Ther's a smart sprinkling of a chance for some of us to do that, though, anyhow."

"And suppose they do get into the mountains?"

"Well, then, we have a heavy contract to carry, that's all. Ah, what's that?"

The sudden exclamation was caused by the speaker's catching sight of the spot where Bill Blaze and party had come upon the trail of the Indians. Conversing as he was, and rapidly as he was riding, Martin's eye was never for an instant blinded, but made constant use of the moonlight, which, before many hours, would fail them. He glanced backward, caught the direction and comprehended in a moment.

"That's the party that were camped down there," pointing with his fingers in the direction of Winkle's lately-left camp. "Only there were two men and three horses then. They must have found a third rider. Wonder if it could be the trapper that is just down from the mountains? They are on the trail hard—and the more the merrier."

Again they dashed on at a rapid rate. Now the silence was unbroken by speech. Well mounted and well armed, Martin hoped to overtake the red-skins before the moon should set, or they have an opportunity to find covert. The three men who had so unexpectedly come to his assistance had evidently a start, and they might be riding in view. Perhaps they might so embarrass the retreat that he would soon come up. Once at close quarters, unless against overwhelming odds, he could rest confident in the prowess of his men.

A mile more was soon devoured; then the whole cavalcade came to a sudden halt at the exclamation from their leader.

A new addition had been made to the number of the forces on one side or the other; and, anxious as he was to push on, Martin was here compelled to pause and make a thorough examination; the result of, which proved at once embarrassing and unexpected. On inspection it was evident that at this spot a small party of Indians had halted for some hours. The grass was beaten down and upon the ground was the imprints of moccasined feet. At first there was a difficulty in finding any further traces of the horsemen of whom they were in pursuit. Martin and two or three of his most experienced trailers gave their keen eyes to the work, while Lariat Dan, Grizzly Dave and Mike Mokler

went circling round on their own account. Endicott and Eben Rothven remained motionless, conversing between themselves. Rothven had entered upon this ride with manifest reluctance, and would even now fain have persuaded his friend that their best policy was to withdraw from a pursuit which was attended with positive danger, and the result of which was so dubious in its nature. But Endicott was neither to be persuaded nor warned, and listened with half-closed ears to the words of his partner.

Almost simultaneously Martin and Grizzly Dan uttered an ejaculation. Each had found a trail leading away from the halting-place. Dick had already found the path made by the halting squad, and, by careful scouting, had satisfied himself that it had been traversed by three mounted men, and a led horse. And looking a few yards further he found the footprints of the same four horses leading back in almost the exact direction from whence they had come. Having noted this he turned to examine into what Grizzly Dave had found.

It was evidently a trail, though a faint one. Just a shadow of a track left, a bruising of the grass as though by the muffled feet of horses. And by the side of it another track, that of Harry Winkle and his two followers. They cautiously moved on a few paces, keeping, with some difficulty, the marks in view. When they came to a spot in the prairie that was soft and rather bare, the hoof-prints of the three horses could be quite plainly discerned. More than that, one of those horses was doubly laden, as could be told by the depth of his tracks. Then Lariat Dan made another discovery which he showed in silence. It was a little shred of stuff which Martin at once recognized as a shred from Edith Van Payne's dress.

"We have it now, boys; come ahead!" shouted the leader, and again they pressed on, guided partly by the feebly discernible Indian trail, partly by the bolder one of the three white men. But, moving with as much rapidity as they could, time, and valuable time, was consumed, and so far it could not be disguised that the redskins had traveled two miles to the white men's one.

Another mile brought a fresh development. The pursued had thrown away all disguise and all attempt to conceal the trail, apparently being more desirous of making a rapid flight than aught else.

As they galloped on, now Lariat Dan drew up alongside of Endicott and spoke to him in a low tone: "Fall back an' out a little; I want to tell yer somethin' you mout not hev noticed."

Something in the tone of the speaker struck strangely the one addressed, and without hesitation he did as requested.

"I rather think thar's more in this than all on us can cipher out at one't, an' so I thort I'd tell you, kinder private like, that this buyer is all durned foolishness, an' we're losin' time. Jist call me a double-barreled ground-hog if the gal hesn't gone t'other way. It's the purtiest piece o' red-skin devilment I've seen fur a cown's age, an' I'll allow it did take in this old hoss at fust; but, I kin see with half an eye now, that them are cusses blinded that trail just enuf

fur it to be found an' time fooled away on it an' the devil's dance played, an' then the two lots'll git together ag'in an' be up in the cover. Ef yer want to see the gal yer best plan is to corner right off. I kin see with both eyes shut whar they're slidin' fur, an' ef the bosses can go the pace, I kin purty nigh make up lost time enough to put yer thar before 'em."

"And how many of the Indians do you think we will find 'thar,' waitin' for them and ready to gobble us?"

"Nary durned one! The other is the nasty trail to foller. Ther'll be jist three o' them, and you and yer partner throwed in. Ef yer say so, I'll tip our boys the wink, an' we can take the route by ourselves; er ef yer wants it, I kin tell Martin, an' maybe the hull lot will go a-b'ilin' off. Don't think too cussed long, for time's preshus."

In the gambling game that Endicott was ready to play, no hand could have been dealt him which would better suit his purposes, provided the statements of Dan, so positively made, could be relied on. There was a risk to run; but the actual rescue of Edith Van Payne by himself, and the consequent possession of her, surrounded only by his own men, was a trump card that he was bold enough to make an effort to possess.

He was willing, for such an unexpected good fortune, to break, at a moment's notice, with Martin.

In fact, as the reader may have surmised, he had already half-decided upon, but a few hours before, the abduction of Miss Van Payne by himself and men. Now he thought he saw the game played to a successful termination, and seeing that, he was willing to blind his eyes to the difficulties and dangers between. He looked at his henchman with an approving smile, and slowly said:

"You have done well. Let Dave and Mike know, and we will follow your lead in search of the other party."

Rothven was close at hand, indeed he was hardly likely to be found among the first riders, and when Charles Endicott, in an undertone, requested him to gradually reduce his speed, he did it without urging. He thought it was a sign that they were about to relinquish the chase; a something which certainly met with his full approval. So quietly and skillfully was the thing managed that, before their defection was discovered, the five men had dropped behind, had turned their horses' heads, and, under the skillful guidance of Lariat Dan, were stretching out over the plain at a gait that plainly evinced that they were desirous of making up for lost time.

Since the utmost silence was maintained, it was some time before Eben could form any estimate of the direction in which he was going, or learn the cause of their withdrawal. When at length an explanation was vouchsafed him, he drew up like one who seems to think he has been thrown from the frying-pan into the fire; but he did not appear to think it worth while to reason with the rest. Only he grumbled out that he thought, if they must go on such a fool's chase, leaving their own legitimate interests, he conceived that at least a decent regard for their

own safety, not entering into the question of effectiveness, might have been exercised, and instead of plunging off into darkness and danger alone, they might have followed on with the main body.

Dan, their present guide, took this murmuring quite pleasantly.

"Yer ha'r'll be just as safe when daylight comes, as ef ye'd follered to a stray shot with Martin an' his trappers. Thar's no tellin' how many o' them will go under afore mornin', yet."

"Yes, come now, don't be grumbling; but save your breath for some emergency. We have a long ride before us, and something of business at the end of it. I never went more gayly to a ball than I go to my work to-night."

"Oh, I'm not grumbling; and when the time comes, you will find me as ready as the readiest. Only I've a respect for the old Napoleonic maxims about the heaviest battalions and the strength of union."

"Them's only jeneral principles," interposed Grizzly Dave. "When yer come down to the fine p'int, ye'll find that when ther time fur a galvanized bu'ster to go in out of the wet has arrove, the identical cuss that shoots plum center slides along with it, an' ye'r' bound to drop. Ef Dick Martin's hand's out, there's the man pullin' in the stakes this very minnit."

What answer Rothven might have made cannot be recorded, for far behind them they, with sudden startlingness, heard the peal of firearms.

"Thar's business now, an' you was just a-grumblin' thet yer head wasn't bein' run slap inter the hornets' nest," said Grizzly Dave. "They've run somethin' to a hole."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FREE TRAPPERS TRAPPED.

It might hardly be credited; yet at least twenty minutes elapsed before the absence of Endicott and his men was noticed. Martin, himself, had full occupation in following the dim trail, while his men, not having yet fraternized with the strangers, accepting them on trust, from Martin's orders, as allies, were alike careless of their absence or presence.

When the desertion was discovered, Martin still continued in apparent indifference to it. After looking from one to another, in temporary doubt, one of the men rode to the side of their leader, and imparted to him the fact, that Endicott, Rothven, and three other men had disappeared from their number.

Whatever he may have felt inwardly, there was no outward manifestation that this intelligence was unexpected, or even new. He received it with a careless nod and wave of the hand, and his only remark was:

"That's all right. Never mind about them; they're all old enough to take care of themselves."

The man drew back, completely deceived by the manner of Martin, and in consequence, there was an idea in the minds of most then present, that he had not only been cognizant of their departure, but that it was more than likely that the absence which had seemed so mysterious originated from his orders.

Inwardly, Martin was more troubled than he would have cared to have owned. It reawakened the ugly suspicions which had led him toward the camp of Endicott, upon the first discovery of the abduction of Edith. Could he have imagined how any understanding with the Indians could have been effected, he would have altered his plans immediately. Once or twice he did think of turning back to find and follow the trail of Endicott.

Perhaps it would have been as well to have done so. It was leading toward his niece, though there had been no complicity with the red-skins. The defection might, however, have been caused by cowardice; so he reasoned, or it might be that Endicott had other schemes on foot, which on mature deliberation he judged to be of more importance than knight-errantry, and dangerous pursuit. The latter view seemed plausible, since he knew him to be a man of schemes and speculations; one, too, not apt to be led away from his course by any motives of sentimental humanity.

By this time the conformation of the ground over which they were traveling, began somewhat to change. Although, following the high divide, the road was still good, yet on one side or the other frequent ravines ran away; in front would a stream, its line of timber showing black under the moonlight. To this the trail directly led. The near bank was precipitous, presenting in most places, a barrier against fording. Yet here and there old buffalo water trails had worn paths to the stream, one of which the driving rain, with its temporary torrents, had washed down, until the descent was not only practicable but easy. Down one of these paths led the trail, crossing the stream, and leading up through a rift in the timber, which stood thickly on the opposite side.

As it happened, the moonlight streamed directly through this rift, reaching every part of the path, shedding sufficient light to make every object therein distinctly visible. As he gave a glance down the bank, at the moment of beginning the descent, Martin noticed this, and that an impenetrable gloom overspread every other surrounding object. Although not expecting danger, and almost certain that he had three times the number of men that he might by any possibility meet with, yet it seemed better to him to order a halt for a moment, while he took a closer view. In obedience to his order, his men drew rein just before coming to the brink of the bluff while he glanced carefully around, listening with suspended breath.

No sound, save the noise of the night-wind and the rippling of the water fell on his ears. So, with carbine at a ready, he began the descent. Just before he reached the water's edge a beaver on the opposite bank dropped off, making so little noise that ears less acute than those of Martin would have doubtless failed to notice it. Every visible sign betokened loneliness and safety. Pushing on across he wound his way up the opposite bank. The ascent, making a reversed curve, was gradual. He passed on perhaps three hundred yards, until he could see, at some little distance ahead, the point where the crown of the bank turned onto the second bottom, and then began to retrace his steps. Ar-

rising again at the stream, he drew to one side until almost concealed by the shadow of an elm, and then, in a tone low, yet sufficiently loud to be heard by his men, gave the order to advance.

Just as the foremost two, but a few yards away, came in sight, he heard a slight, hissing, rustling noise, and something touched him lightly on the shoulder. To him it seemed like a whisper from Death; for he knew they were ambuscaded in the canyon. The touch was given by the feather end of an Indian arrow. The very silence that followed the advent of this messenger of hostility was appalling. Yet withal he retained his self-possession.

In a moment he had taken in the whole position, and decided as to the force of the aggressors, and the course to be pursued. He judged that a few men had been stationed in the shadows to watch, to attack, to harass, to delay. As they were there it seemed but little difference whether he had them on front, flank or rear, as far as danger was concerned; and that it would be best to dash past them as rapidly as possible. They were probably too few in number to make anything like an open attack, and it was only while they were in front that there could be danger.

Acting on this supposition, his voice suddenly broke the stillness, ringing out clear and full upon the ears of the startled men:

"Forward at a gallop, men, and fire at sight or sound!"

Then ensued, a noise of hastily advancing horsemen, who charged into the line of moonlight with reckless obedience to the command of their leader.

Again close to Martin, evidently hurtled in the direction of his voice, there fell an arrow. Then, as with a yell that was scarcely a cheer, his men came plunging across the stream, half a dozen shafts fell in their midst.

Keen eyes and ears were open, and as Martin fired his carbine in the direction from whence he judged the arrows had come, the sound of its report was caught up by the rattle and crash of the firearms in the hands of his men. It seemed to be a blind affair, in which luck would be apt to go further than judgment. Again came a flight of arrows, whistling into the ranks of the white men as they swept by, Martin now at their head, and the revolvers of the assailed cracked viciously as reply. In a moment more the danger for the present was past, and the whole party passed out of the dangerous defile, and galloped a few hundred yards upon the comparatively safe prairie.

Then they drew rein to inquire into the amount of the damage done.

Not a man was missing; but two or three sat but loosely in their saddles, while there were two men who had lost their horses and come out on foot. By good fortune the wounds of the injured men proved but slight, and with a little rude surgery they were both willing and able to proceed.

What injury, if any, had been inflicted upon the attacking party it was impossible to determine. All the firing on the part of the assailed had been at random, even though one or two had thought, as they pulled the trigger of their revolvers, that they were marking down black

shades that might be Indians. Whatever may have been their loss, the half-dozen, at which number Martin had estimated the size of the party, had done their best, and succeeded in inflicting a very fair amount of damage. Whatever was their loss, all remained noiseless in the late left ravine.

From his hunting-shirt one of the men drew an arrow. It had glanced along a leathern strap that he wore, and hung dangling by its feathered end. Handling it carefully he showed it to Martin. That worthy took it and looked at it with a thoughtful glance. By the relative position of head and feather he recognized it in a moment as a war-arrow, and by its make he could give a shrewd guess at the tribe to which its owner had belonged, and he turned to his men with:

"There's been some underhand work that I don't know anything about between some of you boys and these red-skins, and this is what's come of it. I didn't think much of two or three of them being reckless enough to carry off the girl—there's lots of men that will gamble away their lives for the woman that takes their fancy—but there's too many of 'em in this thing not to have a little something else behind it all to urge them on. I ought to look it out and bring the matter straight, for we can't afford to be eternally mussing with the red-skins. However, it's too late now to bother, and, if every man does his duty, we'll let the matter rest when we get to camp. But, I tell you it's got to be the last time that one of our men goes back on the copper-skins."

Having said this much, he turned to the serious work before him. Not for long was he at fault. Again he was on the trail. Scarcely had he followed for two hundred yards, when it took a sudden bend to the right, and began to run parallel with the creek. For perhaps a quarter of a mile it continued in that course, then, turning once more to the right, it was lost in the shade of the timber.

All came to a halt and looked around. From the taste they had they were all in a fit frame of mind to act with prudence. Besides, there were two footmen in the party now.

Standing there, there suddenly appeared, away off on their left, a little clump of moving objects which had just emerged from the head of a ravine. "One, two three—" the white men counted the number until it ended at seven.

"Seven durned, cussed, p'isen red-bellies, by mitey! Them's the cusses that killed my boss, I'll bet my brains!" exclaimed one of the footmen.

Martin scanned the party cautiously, but could perceive no traces of Edith. They in turn, looking back and perceiving that they were observed by the white men, halted a moment, and, drawn up on the hillside slope, made gestures of challenge and menace. When they saw no movement was made in response, they moved off again in single file. Their boldness seemed strange, yet it must be remembered that it was at night, and it was only a plunge from hillside to ravine and they would be invisible. They were shrewd enough to be able to know of their comparative safety.

There seemed to be little danger, now, in at-

tempting to unravel the thread of the trail which led into the timber. Several men were dispatched upon this errand, while others pushed still further on to find their point of exit. When at length it was found and inspected, a singular sensation was effected. The party of whom they were in pursuit had evidently affiliated with a few others and taken part in the ambush; and after the dash past them of the white men, all had made good their retreat to this point, near which their horses had been tethered; and, as the seven men they had seen were evidently identical with the men of the ambush, the question arose: "Where was Edith Van Payne?"

That question arose—and almost immediately received its answer. Martin, once more bringing his judgment into play, saw in a moment they had been tricked. Now, when he once was aware of it, he could trace out how, as well as Blaze had done in the early part of the chase. He reasoned and thought and knit his brows, and his face grew black. Without doubt he knew, too, in what direction it tended, what spot aimed at. He was almost as wise as Blaze himself as regarded the lay of the land in a circle of some hundred miles.

Now, having thrown away the enthusiasm of the first rush of the pursuit, there was only one course left, and that a disheartening one—to acknowledge the error, and attempt to repair it as soon as possible. There was one little gleam of sunshine for him. It seemed more than likely that Winkle and the other men had followed the right trail. The possibility that Endicott and his men had done the same was a problem to be thought over. Should such a supposition be verified, it was hard to tell what would be the feelings awakened. Upon the whole, it is possible that Martin would about as lief have his niece in the hands of her present captors as in those of Charles Endicott.

"No use talking, boys, we've been fooled, and we must make the best of it. We took the wrong trail. Now, which of you feels dead certain that he knows in what direction Straight and Crooked Canyons lay, and the straight road to them, for by the holies, that's where we've got to bend for now."

At this, though the faces of more than one of the party fell, there was no lack of men to offer their needed knowledge. Nor was there any serious disagreement in the statements regarding the direction of the specified locality. Drawn up in a little circle, the direction, distance, and lay of the intervening ground, were discussed, and a plan of procedure mapped out. As the wounded men were not seriously hurt, two of them gave remounts to those who had lost their horses, and, in company with the third, started to return to Martin's ranch. The remainder, having looked well to their arms, pushed off at a regular gallop in the new direction.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BIVOUAC IN CROOKED CANYON.

"NARY time, old man. There ain't a cussed bit o' danger here—no, not nary a half a primin'. Camp right down an' bunk in peace and quietness. My narves is steady, an' thar ain't no eitchin' in the forefinger o' my right hand. A

man in skirty-coats would be safe here, ef he'd nothin' better than a double-barreled shot-gun with no hind-sights."

It was after dark, in a wild and gloomy spot, all shaded and strewn with trees and rocks, and the three men with their three horses were almost breathless from a difficult ascent which they had just made. The three men were Bill Blaze, who was speaking, Harry Winkle, who had spoken, and Pompey, who, the picture of contentment and fidelity, kept his place a little in the background.

"You are sure that we can do nothing more at present, and that we are in no danger of attack, ourselves? We might have been seen by some lookout or scout. I'm always on the side of prudent carefulness."

"Nary bit, I tell yer! Didn't I, Bill Blaze, put yer through? We didn't make no more show than a bob-tail rat. Ef thar war any extra dodge I didn't put on, jist tell me on it, an' I knock under. It warn't no use bein' so dog-goned careful, but havin' bin lit on in one camp, an' sarcumvented a leetle later, makes a feller draw his bead mighty fine. You've hed a lesson from Bill Blaze when that chap war doin' his purtiest, an' ef you hain't l'arned anything you'd better sell yer claim an' go East; yer ain't wanted har."

"I suppose it's all right then. We can give our horses a chance to rest and graze; then a little food and sleep for ourselves; then to work. Pity that we must eat and sleep whether we will or no. What valuable time we have lost in procuring a chance to do the two."

"I ain't so much on the sleep; it's kinder nateral now to do without it; but, I never could see that it was losin' time to take a good squar' meal o' buffler. I've seen the time, too, when I didn't think it war losin' time to gruge clean through a hind-quarter of a black-tailed buck. If ye'd gone across the Cimmerin River, an' got lost on the Ratone Mountings, ye mout hev thought yer war puttin' in the time purty well, guzzlin' down froze hackberries. As for roast coyote, that war a delicacy o' the season to smack yer lips over. Four pound er so wouldn't a-took yer appetite down to regulation pitch. Waugh!"

"Hackberries and prairie-wolf—rather a miserable diet, I should say. Have you tried it?"

"Hev I tried it? Yer right, I hev. That is, the hackberry part. Ther' war only one wolf to about seventy ov us, an' by the time I got my knife out, it war all gone, so I stayed my innards a while smellin' on his bones. I found the derned cusses hed forgot to open his skull—an' them brains! Imagine it yerself; I never kin do 'em justice. Ef I could find a squaw as could dress up vittles to taste like 'em did, consarn my high-heeled top-knot, ef I wouldn't hook on! 'Pears to me I'd be almost willin' to go back to the settlements."

Blaze's enthusiasm, over that remembered meal of brains, amused Winkle vastly. It was not the words but the manner of the man, that made him at times forget his anxiety, bringing to the surface feelings that had long been buried. There was over all the mixed quaintness and bluntness, moderation and brag-

gadocio of the hunter, an irresistible appearance of honesty and trustworthiness that had won upon him in the moments following immediately their first meeting. As the man seemed to have but little to say of others, and all that he had said of himself might well be uttered by one who, swinging loose, years ago, from the restraints of civilization, had ever since, through hardships and dangers, through thick and thin, fire and water, relied for the most part upon himself—at the worst, we do not doubt without some cause, or shadow of cause. As Winkle had none, he felt inclined to trust. After a time arose a desire to confide.

The three men had been in camp some time. They had talked some little, using, as in a country shadowed by danger becomes almost habitual, a guarded tone. There had been intervals of silence, too, when Winkle's mind thronged with exciting and troublous thoughts. During the hours of pursuit there had been but little time to ask questions, and indeed his mind, agitated by surrounding circumstances, suggested but few.

Perhaps Blaze could answer some of these questions, and so, having, as we before stated, during their brief acquaintance acquired a large stock of confidence in him, to Blaze he applied.

"I ain't much acquainted with Dick Martin, an' I don't know more ner the law allows concernin' his private affairs. He come in here several years ago with a couple of men, an' put up a ranch. He war slightly green on the perairie, but hed the balance o' his teeth cut some year afore, an' he l'arned fast. Who he is, er what he is, I can't fur sart'in say; but, he's at the head of as lively a gang of hunters an' Free Trappers as I want to meet. They make a purty wide range when the season's opened an' pelts is prime. The rest o' the time thar's allers more or less on 'em loafin' around Back Load Trace. Mebbe they're squar' an' mebbe they ain't. They never troubled me, but there's men in the gang that's not the kind to stick at trifles. I never heerd o' Martin himself doin' any partikiler deviltry; but, somehow, the place hain't the sweetest o' names. An honest trapper don't ginerally camp long about thar, an' when he meets any o' the men trappin' on the same stream he ain't anxious to stay."

"And the woman we saw, and to save whom we started upon this trip? Who is she, where did she come from? What is her connection with this Martin?"

"Now ye'r askin' questions ag'in that I ain't up to the handle on. Ef ye'd talk about trace-chains an' beaver-bait you'd find me thar. I've tramped over hundreds o' miles an' never see'd a red deer or a white squaw; but the next time I went over the ground thar war plenty o' both. The tramp o' civilization allers bring both along in the same trapsack. Allers a-murderin' an' a-murderin' the deer as it brings 'em. Mebbe it ain't so all over the country: but I often wondered whether they'd all go under when thar weren't no more outskirts fur 'em to live on."

A shade of vexation passed over Winkle's face as he answered somewhat hotly: "As I'm not deer-hunting, I care little to speculate on their

future destiny. My questions had reference to something entirely different."

"Yes," said Blaze, reflectively. "So I'll allow. Mebbe it all amounts to the same—mebbe it don't. I've seen deer-hunts that bagged no game, an' I've seen them which did. As fur the gal, I've hearn of her oft'ner than I've seen her. She turned up one mornin' at Back Load Trace as though she war shook outen a bag. A kinder adopted darter o' Martin's; some one said onc't she war his niece."

"But what is she doing in such a place?"

"What does gals' ginerally do? Rides in the country, shoots a good string, they say, an' raises the devil now an' then. Bin the makin' on her, too. So thin she couldn't git on more ner one side of a hoss, an' so weak she couldn't throw a shadder when she first arove. Bin a-pickin' up sence then."

"And the man I saw riding just behind her—what does he do here? Is he connected with Martin's establishment?"

"Which man was those? Describe the crittur."

To the best of his ability Winkle drew a word-picture of Endicott. Blaze listened with interest, his face showing that he recognized the portrait.

"Now yer comin' to suthin' I can talk cn. No, he ain't none o' Martin's men, an' don't b'long in these regions. He war jist passin' through, in company with three or four more, an' see'd Martin's niece. Knowed her of old, he did. He's a dead idol, he ses, which I suppose are about same's a dead beat, an' from the looks o' the man, I should specify war a very true hit. Killed the gal onc't afore, but she's come to life ag'in, an' as the other chap ses, ain't likely to forget it. Ef—

"Man, man!" exclaimed Winkle, excitedly. "How came you to know this? The same story, the same story! To travel fifteen hundred miles, and the first man I pick up can tell me the same story! I tell you," continued he, fiercely, leaping up and shaking his clinched fist in the direction of Back Load Trace, "I tell you he's my man!"

"Ef you'd go a leetle slower it mo'ut facillate peddlin' operations. Sit down yere like a reasonable white man that ain't anxious to hev his ha'r cut fur nothin', an' I'll tell yer, nigh as I kin, the facts in the case."

This common-sense address recalled Winkle to himself, and he resumed his sitting position, but his eye still blazed and his frame shook with suppressed emotion.

"Tell me where you heard this then, or how you came to know so much of a story I certainly should not have expected to hear in this region."

"Simple as coon-trappin'. When I 'fu'st struck yer camp I honest allow I mo'ut hev been indooed to hev run off yer hossflesh."

After this rather queer exordium, Blaze paused, as if expecting an outburst; but Winkle was beginning to understand his man, and remained silent.

"Yas, that's an onmitigated fact. Soon es I slung inter the rights o' things I felt a speshal call to see they warn't run off. So, while you an' the dark war snoozin', I hed one eye open. I

felt somethin' war abroad, an' went out a-scoutin'. Nigh whar you come so nigh puttin' my light out, under the shadder o' the trees, in fact whar you found me, I heerd two men a-talkin'; one on 'em was 'your man,' t'other a gospil chap, that talked es though he'd bucked cl'ar frum under the Big Book an' tuk to travelin' on his shape."

"What were they talking of, and how came they to speak of that which you have just mentioned?"

Thus questioned, Blaze gave a synopsis of their conversation as understood by him, winding up with:

"And now s'posin' you give us an idea of what yer man has really bin a-doin'."

CHAPTER X.

A STORY OF A DOUBLE MURDER.

AS we have already stated, Winkle, while fighting the crowd of phantoms and fancies that overshadowed him, had felt inclination to confide in his newly found comrade. Being thus addressed decided him.

"I don't know that I am making mountains out of mole-hills. I think, though, that perhaps I have given way where I should have fought it out, and allowed myself to be overpowered by that which would only make a ripple in some men's lives. Sometimes I can think of that man Endicott coolly enough; there are times, too, when I want and intend to kill him. Yet I suppose that others have been injured as much—and forgiven. Men are not always responsible for their mad fancies—do you think they are?"

Blaze gave a curious look at the speaker. He appeared to ask the question in perfect good faith, so the trapper answered:

"Not fur the'r mad fancies allers. No."

"I don't want to make a long story, and I don't want to go into too many details. I want my head cool now, if ever. It seems to me it's cleared off wonderfully of late; perhaps it might so happen that I could forgive. All the forgiveness in the world, though, won't bring poor Ned back to life, or mend a mother's broken heart."

"I've never had much to do with him personally. I'm glad of it. Perhaps there would have been enough of the cursed fascinating power about him to have ruined me too. Ruin! No, that's not the word, either. He did that anyhow. Made me his slave, or his tool, or his victim."

"You see Ned went from college into business, and might have done well if he had never met Endicott. And I went from business into love, and might have prospered if Endicott had not lived. There are some crimes that law don't avenge and some that it does. Endicott has tried his hand at both sorts, and the law, being weak, only punished him, or attempted to, for the latter. Very lightly it laid it on him, too."

"Mebbe it hit him harder than you think fur," interpolated Blaze. "It's no fun gittin' inter them clutches. But go on."

"Perhaps it did. I don't believe I ever thought of that before. Ned and mother and I were wrapped up in each other. It's not often, I think, that you find a family like ours was. There had never been a difference of opinion or

a single jar; but everything went on smoothly. Ned was the pet. He was the youngest and the frailest, and when I was away at college he was left alone with mother. It never made me jealous a bit because, somehow, it seemed natural. When I came home I petted him too. We weren't rich exactly; but we had some money, and by a little care had managed to live almost as though we were. Perhaps if we had felt poverty we might have been happier. But, we had a taste of the luxurious, and I'm afraid it gave and fed a desire for means more ample. Ned, at least, got possessed with a yearning to be wealthy; and I was in haste myself to realize some of my dreams. I'm not going to trouble you with a complete family history, or tell how he and I, in our different spheres, toiled ahead, with fair prospects, for several years.

"One day I saw Edith Van Payne; and the picture she marked in my brain just then has never faded since.

"She was entirely different from any other woman I had ever met, for there were everlasting contradictions connected with her. She looked dashing and almost masculine, yet she really was intensely feminine. Perhaps I was slow with my wooing, yet I know I was wrapped up in it. I cannot tell how much encouragement I at first received. As much, I guess, as I deserved. You see, she was almost alone in the world, and was making her own way as best she might. She had a younger brother, though I saw very little of him. After a bit Ned became acquainted with her. I introduced him myself. They soon became great friends, though their friendship never ripened into anything like sentimentality.

"How or when Ned first became mixed up with Endicott I do not know. In haste to become rich, he was open for speculation. I'm not certain that it was not through Miss Van Payne. She knew him, met him often, yet by some chance I never was introduced to him, never saw the three together. What do you suppose the result was? He murdered both! It all seemed to be done in an instant as it were. I was away from home for a fortnight, and when I came back it was over. Ned he killed; that I *might* have borne, but, until a few days ago, I thought he had killed the woman too.

"Mother had noticed a change in the boy. For two or three days she would not see him; then he would come home taciturn and upset. At that time she could only guess that his business affairs were going wrong. Afterward I found how far out he had been led by this Endicott, who, all the time feathering his own nest well, was dragging him to the quicksands of financial rottenness."

"The crisis came during my absence. Carefully as he covered the traces of his agency, Ned detected his share in the work. At first, to be sure, there was only a faint suspicion; but, that soon ripened into a certainty. Knowing my hopes and wishes, brotherly love urged him to employ every means to learn the truth. Once engaged in this, he was led to suspect Endicott's business integrity, and the revelations brought about by an investigation in that direction were of themselves overpowering.

"Then he did either a foolish or an unfortu-

nate thing. Just in the white heat he met Endicott. Remember, that he not only knew that this man had compromised, almost beyond redemption, the woman his brother loved, but that he himself was involved in a network of toils from which he could not hope to escape short of the loss of his means, and, worse still, with a damaged reputation. They met—and Endicott killed him.

"Of course the jury found extenuating circumstances. Legal chicanery, set in motion by money, saved his worthless neck—a neck that could I have once grasped I would have wrung with as little compunction as that of a chicken. I think I could have borne that horror; but, engrossed as I was by it, it was some weeks before I knew that Edith had disappeared.

"At this time I believed she had made away with herself. I never doubted it until the other night. Of all those who knew her, there are few that did not believe the same. Heaven knows that I was loth to believe it. I hunted high and low for her, since I never doubted her honor, though I had never received any assurance of her love for me. Her own brother was left in the dark as to what had become of her. He found an envelope addressed to him, containing a sum of money she had saved for a rainy day, and the simple words, written in pencil, 'Good-by.'

"My own business, suffering for a time from utter neglect, was disposed of; my heart was chilled toward my broken-hearted mother—God help me, she may be dead to-night—and I spent my time seeking for traces of Edith, and waiting to meet Endicott.

"While I was off on what I thought a slight trace, for I had not fully allowed myself to believe that she was dead, he emerged from a prison, and escaped me. I followed him East; he eluded me. I heard of him South; but he was gone when I reached New Orleans. Then I gave way and was sick for a long season. When I came to myself something prompted me to turn Westward. Strange how fate, or some occult law of attraction, draw me here. Yet many months of wandering, through hardships and perils, brought me no surcease, and the tension on my nerves has been gradually tightening ever since I found myself west of the Mississippi. The rest you know. What *may* happen, neither you, nor I, nor any other living mortal may say."

Winkle told his story in a slow, quiet, yet intense way. Blaze listened to it with evident interest.

"A condemned hard case he was. I've known men shot fur less than them. That's the cuss o' civilization. If ye'r' goin' to draw a bead upon this man, ye'd better do it here than funder East. Bein' that you've found the girl alive, mebbe you'll weaken on that. A human critter's a curi's consarn thet only goes under onc't. In course, red-skins I don't take much account on; but, when it comes to drawin' it fine on a white, an' he not lookin' for it—pears to me it 'u'd glimmer the fire-sight."

"I think at two hundred yards he would be a dead man!"

Winkle said this slowly and half inquiringly, as though a doubt had arisen in his mind; and

then he continued, in a tone in curious contrast to the one he generally used in speaking of Endicott:

"You know I've followed after him so long, and was so certain of it. It would be hard to let him go after all."

"Two hundred yard is some distance, an' a man's a mark o' moderate bigness. I've seen a deer missed at fifty. Buck ag'er an' fancy shootin' don't agree good. If you'll just keep cool an' not rush the funeral, mebbe ye'll eventually git straight enough to not care a cuss if school keeps er not. I've done ye more ner a hundred dollars' worth of good a'ready."

"True, I know that—yet if that man were here now, if he could appear suddenly—"

A remarkable change came over the man as he broke off the sentence and sprung to his feet. Blaze, who trusted completely his own senses, and was confident that Winkle could have discovered no signs of any danger, looked at him in doubt and amazement as he stood bending now to one side, again to another, eagerly listening, his rifle clutched with a nervous grip.

"D'ye hear him?" he whispered. "He's coming, he's coming! curse him, I tell you he's here now."

Then Blaze listened. It seemed, almost like a fancy, too, that he heard, away miles off, a voice. He knew not whether it was the voice of man or of nature. There are times when in Western solitudes the two sound so wondrously alike that one is startled and perplexed. The voices that one hears in the cottonwoods by the river-side, or the cedars in the canyons! A brooder or a dreamer alone with them might well be driven mad.

While the trapper listened, Winkle stole noiselessly away. The negro, who had, during the recital of Winkle's story, been lying wrapped in a blanket, unconsciously sleeping, suddenly awoke to consciousness, and answered Blaze's astonished exclamation of, "Where the thunder's the boy gone to?" with:

"Jist hold on hyar a bit. Dat's nuffin new. He done gone do dat ebery leetle while; I fotch him back. Dat's de on'y t'ing 'bout Mass'r Winkle dat's cur'us. He say he t'inks he hear hees man."

Pompey, without more ado, slid off in the direction in which Winkle had gone, leaving Blaze alone, to ruminate on the story he had just heard. The negro was brimful of Western experience, and Blaze thought it needless to follow. This summary exit of the two from camp gave him fresh food for reflection, and his thoughts were somewhat mixed, as would appear from his soliloquy:

"Some, now, would call him crazy. I dunno; guess both sides is ground down to one p'int, an' that, 'my man.' Everyways else I reckon he's more brains ner I hev—which's a fair allowance fur this individooal to make. Ef he could git 'my man' off his intellek he'd be purty square. Cuss me, though, ef I wouldn't like to know whether 'my man' is in the canyon, or hereabouts. That's the queer part of the thing—his followin' him by guess, er instink. I've see'd a herd o' deer scattered this way an' that an' the t'other, an' often wondered how it came they war all together ag'in by mornin'. Not so sin-

g'lar as the way he's follered 'my man.' I wonder ef he'll ever find him? I b'lieve 'bout two month waitin' to see, alongside o' this Winkle, would tame me down amazin'. I'm gittin' steady es an otter-slide now. Waugh!"

CHAPTER XI

WHITHER EDITH WENT.

THE average American Indian is not a charming object. Treacherous, bloodthirsty, cunning, he seems to need but the opportunity to show himself a monster. Much may be said in extenuation; but, there will still remain behind the hard array of facts. Was the author writing for Cheyenne, Crow, Blackfoot, Comanche or Apache readers, perhaps he might say the same of the white man, and the statement, on their limited personal knowledge, be readily accepted. In the one case it is to be hoped that the exceptions are in reality the rule, while in the other we fear they prove it.

Edith Van Payne was well acquainted with the general character of the dusky people into whose hands she had fallen. When War Hawk and his daring followers had swooped down upon her, she had, at the first shock, uttered a scream for help. In imagined security it was most sternly startling to feel herself caught up and borne off like the rush of the wind. The crack of a rifle, fired, she doubted not, by one of Martin's men, recalled her, in some measure, to herself. Yet, as she hung across the neck of the warrior's steed, and felt the firm grip of his powerful hand, she might well lapse into a state of semi-unconsciousness. When, at length, she again became fully awake to her position, a long distance had been placed between her and her late home.

When Edith found herself able to catch a confused glimpse of her abductor, she thought she recognized his face. That thought gave her some comfort at least, since it brought her a sense of relief from any present positive danger.

The relations between Martin and the red-skins who surrounded him had been heretofore those of peace. By a rare piece of good luck at the outset, and afterward by judicious management, he had so secured their apparent goodwill, that he had been led to look upon them rather as allies. With some of them he had carried on considerable traffic in pelts and robes, and they came often to his ranch. Edith, with a woman's curiosity, had scanned them narrowly, and the most of them had accepted the gaze of her flashing eye in an unconcerned manner. In one or two she detected answering glances of admiration that rather amused her.

In the Indian who was now bearing her away she believed she recognized War Hawk, one of those she had classed as her admirers.

By the time that War Hawk had joined the small party that was awaiting him, Edith had settled in her mind the course which she intended to pursue. Holding herself in constant readiness to accept any opportunity to escape, she would keep up a bold front. She would not waste her strength in vain endeavors, but in the hour of action be brave and resolute.

War Hawk marked the phases of returning

consciousness, bewilderment, doubt and firm determination. Though he could not fully understand, he could appreciate much of the mental force which, faced, in calmness, such a situation. A thrill of pride ran through him at the thought, that he had not been mistaken in the stuff of which his captive was made.

"The White Bird need not fear. War Hawk would not harm. He hopes she will some day neither fear nor wish to fly. She must not flutter now. There is danger to both, and he will not die alone."

"For myself I fear not. I am in no present haste to flutter nor fly. I remember you, sir; I know you. The years that you have passed among the whites—for I know your story—should have taught you better. And you will have to account for this, to not only the white people, but your own tribe. Be sure that both will be ready to bring you to a reckoning."

"War Hawk has a heart to feel, and also is brave to dare. Now be still. Shall he trust you to ride?"

It was during the momentary halt that this conversation took place. She, seeing nothing to be gained by refusing, answered by an affirmative motion of the head. In a moment she was transferred to the back of a mustang, and all the preparations for blinding the trail having already been made before she was fairly settled to a seat, both parties had moved off. Unlearned as she was in wood and prairie-craft, she had no difficulty in perceiving that an effort was being made to deceive those who might follow after. From the smallness of the number of men engaged in the affair, she did not doubt but that more than ever the red-skins intended to employ stratagem in preference to force in their retreat. They knew, as well as did Edith, that, as the trapping season was just about to open, there was an unusually large number of hunters at Back Load Ranch. Doubtless, also, they believed that pursuit would be immediately made.

For a time the pace was moderate. So slow did they seem to be progressing, that Edith had hopes for a time of hearing the footsteps of Martin and his men thundering on in their wake. She did not believe War Hawk would execute his dark threat, even though she was aware that prisoners had been killed to prevent their rescue or escape.

This slow rate of progress did not long continue. Again they were hastening on, all attempts at concealment of their route being thrown aside. They swept across the prairie for hours. The moon sunk in the west, the night grew darker around them, but with untiring energy they dashed on.

There is no need to chronicle in detail the history of the flight. The night passed; the day broke, and still they pressed ahead. No living human being crossed their path. There were no certain signs of pursuit. Once, from the actions of the Indians, Edith had her attention specially turned backward. She thought she caught, through the marvelously clear prairie atmosphere, a glimpse of three dark objects miles away. It might be a little clump of horsemen—more likely a herd of antelope or elk.

They rode in silence. Neither the captive nor

the captor felt much disposition to converse. A feeling of suspense and uncertainty was brooding in the minds of both. Edith, even, began to look forward with a dim yearning for the time to halt to arrive. Weariness began to oppress her, sleep to try at her eyelids.

At length they left the prairie; crossing a shallow stream, they went up its bank for some distance; then, turning away from it, and picking their way for perhaps half a mile over uneven and stony ground, they entered a defile which, under the name of Straight Canyon, led through the rocky range before them. In its gloomy recesses the spirits of Edith sunk again. She would have prayed for a halt, had she not been so unwilling to show weakness. Perhaps it was purely pride—perhaps it was from good judgment. Physically so frail-looking, she had the will to brave fatigue. Had she allowed herself to falter at all, the result would have been utter prostration.

War Hawk seemed at length to have an idea that he was, perhaps, tasking his captive beyond her powers of endurance. More than once he scanned her features narrowly. Her naturally pale cheek seemed to be no paler; there was no tremor in her hands; her eyes blazed as brightly as ever.

"If the White Bird is worn out, let her ask and she shall stop. There is no danger. She can rest. But a little further on we come to a long halt."

Without hesitation she responded:

"I am tired, but can go further."

Straight Canyon was threaded, and a narrow valley lay before them. Beyond, another range loomed up darkly.

Crossing the valley they began to ascend a gentle slope. They had not gone far when, at some little distance, she heard a signal which was immediately answered by one of the Indians beside her. A few moments more, and the halting-place was reached.

Rude as were the accommodations, it was with a feeling of unutterable relief that Edith Van Payne rested her wearied limbs in her little prison-hut. She had scarce noticed the two or three lodges that were scattered around.

How long a halt would be made there she scarce thought it worth while to ask. The by no means unsavory viands that were brought her, she put aside for the time almost untasted, only too glad to be at rest and alone.

CHAPTER XII.

"WHEN A WOMAN WILLS THERE'S NOTHING MORE TO SAY."

DAYLIGHT waned, and the shadows deepened. In the west the crimson flames that flared over the mountains died away, and the night-stars began to shimmer in their field of blue. A moist, sweet wind came wandering up from the woods. Edith sat within her little prison-house alone.

From time to time she heard voices without; but they came to her as if in a dream. The cold look of the woman had deepened till her face seemed like crystallized water itself.

But in the frigidity of her eyes was a something that was suggestive of unfrozen depths beyond. There was no trace of despair—no sign of intense misery directly arising from her

present condition like that which would have fallen upon some women. Only the traces of a former congealment were deepened; that was all. And so, she sat there in silence, thinking. So absorbed in her reverie was she that, apparently, she did not hear a footstep approaching the matting that did duty as a door to her cabin, did not notice the tall and graceful form of War Hawk, as he entered; and only awoke with a start to consciousness at hearing a voice, remarkably sweet and mild for one belonging to a son of the forest and plain, addressing her.

"The White Bird is sad, and the War Hawk would comfort her—yet he is afraid to come before her. She need not fear him. He is a great warrior, but would not harm her for many lodges and much of all that is dear to the heart of a warrior. Can the White Bird look upon the War Hawk with a smile? She will see him as gentle as a fawn, for she is dear to him, and what she says will be music in his ear."

Edith suffered her eyes to rest steadily upon her Indian admirer, whose assumed gentleness could not disguise his stern, unyielding nature. So the woman thought, though her eye met his unflinching and undaunted.

"The White Bird may be sad, but it is the sadness of years. She asks neither favor nor kindness from the War Hawk. As she has protected herself in the past, so she can in the present and the future. She has been hurt to the heart so long ago that she has no soul for the great chief. Let him go his way and she will go hers."

The ghost of a smile flitted over the face of the brave at this request. This conquest of his had not been altogether bloodless, as the waters of Back Load stream could bear witness.

"The White Bird will grace the wigwam of the War Hawk, and those who have hurt her heart shall be forgotten. If they come near her again, let her speak the word and they shall die. This arm will protect her, and no woman will be more honored among my nation."

Edith looked curiously at the speaker. She measured him with her eye and gauged his soul as he spoke. Perhaps she could see in this dashing red-skin something to admire, even though there was nothing for one of her race to love.

"The White Bird returns her thanks," she said, with a graceful but sweeping courtesy. "The chief's wooing is rough and his grip is like steel, but she knows the warriors of his tribe and their ways, and the War Hawk may well be the greatest among them. He is pleasant to look upon, and the squaw of his lodge will have the eyes of many maidens turned upon her in envy; yet the White Bird, as he has chosen to call her, has no heart for him. Her soul rests with one of her own kindred. Though she has not seen him for years, and will never meet him again, yet her heart will ever beat time to him—even though he knows it not, and little dreams that she still lives. Let the War Hawk seek another; I am not for him."

"The warriors of our tribe are not used to wooing as are the pale-faces, and if War Hawk had sought the fair one he loves as our warriors seek their squaws, she might have thought his grip was stronger yet. He has handled her tenderly and would ever do so; yet she should

know that she *must* be his. She is in his hands now, he will have her taken into his tribe; he will guard her and care for her; no other shall be so cherished. He has been in danger from her people and his own for her, and life has been lost to win her. Do you think, then, when he loves her so strongly, that he will open his hand when she is in it and let her fly away? No. The White Bird must forget her pale-faced friends—and—"his voice grew harder and colder, and there was a ring of savage fierceness in it as he spoke—"let her dream of her pale-faced lover no longer. If she should see him again it would be to destroy him, for he may not look on your face again and go away living. The War Hawk will let no eyes rest upon his pale-faced squaw in love."

Edith Van Payne realized more than ever the depth to which she had stirred the heart of her dusky-visaged admirer.

"War Hawk, you have wasted time in your pursuit, and you seek what will never, never be yours. There are fair maidens of your own race; woo them and win them—me you never can, by either kind words or threats. I am protected by the Great Spirit, and neither hope nor fear. Your pursuit may bring you much of evil—to me it can only bring a new experience of life. Do not be deceived. I am, and of reason, a mystery to you, the solution of which it is dangerous for you to attempt."

Perhaps Edith drew herself up rather proudly as she uttered these words, perhaps there was something, too, of scorn mingled with her pride, and unintentionally outcropping in her words and gestures, for War Hawk appeared touched to the quick. He strode a pace forward and raised his hand with a gesture that might indicate either impressiveness or menace. The woman only turned sideways and unflinchingly gazed into his face as he spoke.

"The War Hawk has run many risks for his pale White Bird. He has faced not only the rifles of her friends, but even now he stands against the wishes of his tribe. It is not a light thing for a great chief to choose to bring a pale-face woman into his cabin; but he has seen something of the world, something of the pale-faces, too, and he will accomplish his desires. The White Bird has flown away from her people; they will never see her again. Had they even the courage to follow her, they would not know in which way to turn their steps. The War Hawk will say no more this time; but let her think of what he has said, and perhaps she will yet smile at the coming of the footsteps of the great chief."

"Let not the Blackfoot brave deceive himself. He is not dealing with a helpless squaw of his tribe. I can help myself if forsaken by friends. But I have no fears of that. Their eyes are keen, their limbs are untiring, and they are already on the trail. You may not see them, or hear them; but they will be near you, and when the time comes you will find your White Bird has flitted—if before that the fatal bullet has not stricken you—"

Without then was the sound of a rapidly-approaching horseman. Edith paused in her speech as she heard it, and her savage wooer looked uneasily around him as though he half-

feared this hot-haste messenger might be the bearer of unpleasant tidings. The two, listening, heard a distant greeting, the sound of beating hoofs ceased, and then the new-comer, an Indian, inquired for War Hawk. The chief, on hearing this, made an obeisance and left the cabin as quickly as he had entered it.

Edith Van Payne remained alone. With feminine curiosity she listened to see if she could not learn what this messenger had to communicate. She only heard voices speaking in a low and smothered tone, but soon the conversation became more earnest. Then she sought to gain a view of the speakers. Circumstances favored her. When she cast her glance upon them, she saw that preparations for a move of some kind were being made. In front of the second cabin War Hawk was in close conference with several of the braves. Nearer to her, in fact within a few paces of her own wigwam, stood a single savage, holding by the bridles two horses—one of which she recognized at a glance as Whirlwind, the favorite steed of War Hawk.

This man stood with his back toward her, his eyes bent in the direction of the others, evidently more intent upon the conference of his brethren than upon the movements of the captive girl. The great black steed, that stood almost unwatched and within, as it were, arm's length of her, was the fleetest among the fleet horses of the tribe.

Great acts are often the effect of intuition. She tried the fastenings, and found nothing to hinder her egress. A moment, and she had noiselessly glided to the side of Whirlwind. A moment more and she had swung herself upon him, had snatched up the bridle, struck him a sharp blow across the shoulder—and then, like an arrow, had bounded away and was sweeping back toward the mountains through which they had just passed!

The noble steed, to which Edith, practiced horseman that she was, clung so closely and firmly, had not hesitated a moment. He swung at once into a pace that was tremendous. His rider retained her seat with ease, and while urging him to his highest speed, did not for a moment lose her perfect mastery of him. The other horse had wrenched himself loose at the time that Whirlwind started, and, bearing no burden, kept neck and neck with her.

Soon the wild shouts of War Hawk and his allies died away in the distance. She saw an opening in the hills, the defile of a canyon looming dark before her; and into its recesses she plunged without a moment's hesitation. What might be in store for her beyond, in the loneliness and darkness, she neither knew, nor thought of, nor cared for. For the time at least, Edith Van Payne was free.

The horses seemed to know the road well. At least they stretched out, plunging on with unfaltering steps into the darkness. Before long the thrill and thrall of her fear wore off, and, as no savage yells or echoing hoof-beats resounded behind her, she coolly settled herself to the work before her. The long twilight had died away, and the moon, nearly full, was up and shining directly through the narrow road, doubling the gloom that lay upon the wooded

and rocky slopes on each side—so that she seemed riding along a path of light laid upon and through a bed of darkness. Her quick eye ranged along this path, now and then diving into the darkness upon either side of her; yet seeing nothing but rocks and trees.

Yet, there was some one near. Not a hundred yards ahead of her, just in the shade of the trees, his wariness all excited by the noise of ringing hoof-strokes, Bill Blaze was sitting in his saddle with eyes strained to catch sight of the person so recklessly approaching. And when he saw the woman bearing down upon him, the riderless horse galloping at her side, he could scarce refrain from a shout of triumph as he recognized in her the object of his search.

"Minks and mushrats!" thought he. "Blam'd ef she ain't Dick Martin's gal. A trump, by mitey! She's cleaned out the bull b'iling; stampeded ther corral, an' 's bringin' the pick o' the lot into camp! Bill Blaze an' her 'll move inter Back Load camp rejoicin'. Waugh!"

When the fast rider was galloping by, she heard at her left a voice, calling to her in what seemed a guarded tone:

"Hullo, thar! Back Load Tracer! Dick Martin! Van Payne! Friends. Hullo! hold on, friends!"

She looked hastily toward the spot from which the voice proceeded. A man, evidently a white man and a trapper from his garb, pushed out from the shadows, and rode toward her.

For a moment she hesitated, undecided whether to augment her speed, or to wait for him. The sight of a white man seemed a sign of aid and comfort. Again he hailed her. In the moonlight she could see that he held his right hand up with the palm open and toward her; a sign of amity. Confidence came to her by inspiration, and without a struggle she allowed him to range up to her side. When he came nearer, she knew that she had never seen him among the Free Trappers who followed the beck of Martin.

"There is little time for talk now. I know not how closely pursuers may be behind us. What we have to say we must say as we gallop on. I see that you know, me, and I need not stop to explain."

"That's all right. We've bin on the scout arter ye, an' I war jest rollin' slow into what I thort war blam'd dangerous diggin's. Wouldn't wonder ef you've saved my skulp; an' yer chances won't be any the wuss fur hev'in' Bill Blaze to steer yer through this yere diffikilty."

"Do you know this country? I took this route by chance, without knowing whither I was going; and only determined on riding on till I found myself—somewhere."

"Know it like a book. Yer tuk the right; couldn't 'a' showed ye a better myself. Yer driftin' right through Crooked Canyon. You might 'a' taken a shorter cut to reach the other side of the mount'ins; but then, you'd 'a' missed me, sure. How the what you call 'em did yer git on it? Don't s'pose the top-knots is so overflowin' with the milk o' human kindness, thet they've sit ye up in the boss bissness themselves!"

Edith, in a few brief words, explained the rapidly-shifting scenes of the evening, passing

lightly over her interview with War Hawk, and winding up with:

"And now, as you are fittest to act the part of guide, what do you propose doing?"

Blaze was silent a moment as he revolved in his mind the intelligence that he had received, then answered:

"Yer see, miss, thet ain't so easy to answer right at onc't. All that excitement weren't fur nothin'. Depend upon it, that scout tumbled acrost somethin' that weren't kalkerlated to fit the'r arrangements. It's more ner likely Martin and his men are comin' up Straight Canyon. Yer see ther's two passes—one on 'em called Straight and t'other Crooked. We're in the crooked. I tried this yere one acause my luck's the dog-gonedest contrairiest thing you ever see'd, and I allus hev to be just whar I oughtn't, ef I don't want everything to bu'st up to eternal smash. We can't git out o' here to-night, an' I guess the best thing is to sail along a few hours, an' then stop off till mornin'. Martin's sure to be somewhar in the neighborhood. Ef he's in this canyon, we'll find him; ef he's in the t'other, he'll keep yer Indian friends up an' busy, an' find us, since I've got a few ideas about them copper-skins, an' when I think 'em over right, I'll let you know what they are. Just now let us make our prettiest time."

In accordance with this, the speed, which had slackened as they conversed, was accelerated, and for a long time the two rode on in silence.

CHAPTER XIII.

A WILD RIDE.

IT was morning now in the canyon. Heroes and heroines require sleep—in that they resemble other more commonplace individuals. Perhaps Blaze had slept some; but, wearied as he had been for some days with a constant round of dangerous adventures and hairbreadth escapes, at daylight he was wide awake, ready to face whatever dangers and difficulties the morning might bring. The woman was still as a statue. Her breath came quietly; her slumber was sweet. Blaze sat at a little distance from her, just by the horses, with his rifle close at hand, and looked at his fair charge. There was something in the face of Edith that seemed to be worth studying. As he thought how frail and nerveless she looked in the first pale light of the morning, he was afraid that he had his hands full.

"Blamed ef the little woman looks es though she'd stand carryin'. Kinder sorter 'pears of glass, like. Shouldn't wonder ef she'd break all up into small bits afore I git her a rod. She ain't put up as solid es a Blackfoot squaw, Es fur as the fakilty of transportin' goes, I'd kinder sooner she war. Cur'ous how tastes does differ! Howsomever, Bill Blaze will do his level best, an' ef luck don't run too all-fired rough it may be on the keerds to—blast it, yes! To what? Ef I ain't keerful the copper-skins'll take my ha'r, an' Dick Martin shoot me on sight. As fur that crazy Winkle, I dunno how soon he'll come crawlin' up an' lettin' drive on s'picion that I'm his man. There's a three-cornered state of affairs here, an' no mistake. It's a kinder blessin' maybe, after all, that the gal

herself ain't likely to give much trouble." Then he gave a start. "She must 'a' knowed I war thinkin' on her, fur she's got her eyes wide open."

Edith had opened her eyes. She looked around for a moment with an air of quiet bewilderment. Then, apparently comprehending the status of things, she slowly raised her head from the rude pillow; something like the shadow of a blush flitted across her cheek, and she turned to the trapper.

"Well, sir, the morning is here; what do you propose doing?"

"I'd sooner hev Chep Carter draw a bead on me with his finger already on the trigger and him dead set on shootin', than answer that question. Blamed ef I know *what* to do."

"One of us must decide what is to be done, and that right quickly. If you think you can find a way to get beyond our enemies to a place of safety, at Back Load Clearing, or elsewhere, say so. If you think you cannot, say so; and I'll try what my wits are worth in this emergency."

Blaze scratched his nose dubiously. It was not that he had not full confidence in himself, but rather it was an unexpectedly amusing thing for this woman, on whose frailty he had but lately been passing mental criticisms, to speak in such short, decisive and self-reliant tones.

"Mebbe the best thing would be to do nothin'. I've knowed persons who war in a box to git out by just sittin' still—an' I've know'd others, that war bound to keep movin', to run right slap onto the biggest kind of a hornets' nest. In course, I kin find a way out. That's my name—jest what I war made fur. Only don't push a willin' loss. Let me roominate a bit."

"Last night you said wait till morning. It's morning now, and having waited patiently, I am anxious to be up and off. Think quickly, then—I'm not a friend to slow going."

"Wal, yer see, ther's several bearin's on this yere. We know whar we've bin, whar we are, but don't know whar we're goin', an' more particularly who's wantin' to go with us. The end to this trail's a ticklish spot to travel over, that wants daylight or full moonlight to git safely through. Then, I've a couple ov chums somewhars in this region, that I can't leave without seein'. I don't feel afear'd of the red-skins. My narves is es steady as a shootin'-match, and they's a sure sign. Ye wouldn't like to stay here a day longer, would ye?"

"I am on the side of safe boldness, whatever that may be. I wish to make my way from this region as quickly as may be convenient and safe!"

"Jest one minnit. This yere's how the land lays: Es I told yer, I've a couple of chums somewhars nigh. We was a-lookin' fur you, ye see, an' there's two other lots on the same biz, an' one on 'em is comin' up Straight Canyon, ef there's any faith in signs. The other lot may be goin' on the same road, or we may stumble acrost 'em on our way down. Blessed ef I don't wish I knowed which are on this trail an' which on t'other. Now, we'll take a bite o' somethin' to stay our in'ards, an' then be movin'. I hope I've cut it short."

The bite was soon taken, and taken almost in silence. From time to time Edith asked a question, and at length understood that Blaze was of the opinion that Martin and his men had followed in pursuit, and it was their approach that had alarmed the Indians. He told Edith as briefly as it was in his nature to speak, that War Hawk had not ventured to bring his wished-for bride into the village of his tribe; that, in all probability, save the chance of a stray hunter, there was not an Indian outside of War Hawk's small party within thirty miles of them. Their journey for the day, he thought, would be one of comparative safety. Their greatest danger lay away out upon the plain, beyond the opening of the canyon; and for that reason he was anxious to augment the strength of their party, even though he felt able, if his "luck held," to carry her through in safety by himself.

Having said this much in his strange and rather uncouth way, the two sought saddle, and Blaze led his charge down the canyon.

They rode along at first rapidly and in silence.

Before long Edith became satisfied that Blaze had been wise in thinking that they needed daylight to make their way over that part of their journey. The road, before so smooth, became rougher and rougher, until, finally, it seemed to her that it would grow absolutely impassable. Here and there, to the side, she saw gulches and ravines that invited them by their evenness, but her guide resolutely withstood their wooings, and kept straight on, around and over rocks, across dykes and gullies, up and down they went, till at last, meeting with obstacles more serious than any they had as yet encountered, they dismounted and toiled upward on foot.

"Ef we're spry now," encouraged Blaze, "half an hour more will take us over the roughest, an' then we'll hev level road clean down to the mouth of the canyon."

Accustomed as Edith was to exertion and exercise, she was heartily glad when the most toilsome part of the road was passed, and, seated once more on Whirwind, she could pursue her journey with more ease, though Blaze, still on foot, was piloting her carefully.

"Here we come," said he, as, turning a sharp corner, they found themselves at the beginning of a better path. Then in a different tone of voice, in a voice that partook of mingled excitement and uneasiness, he shouted: "The devil! Here he comes!" and, quick as light, firing his rifle, he sprung forward, while the steed of Edith, which had been giving hitherto unnoticed tokens of dissatisfaction, with a scream of fright, gave a mighty plunge, and then, in an uncontrollable frenzy, rushed like a thunderbolt away! As she was borne on in this mad career she heard the voice of Blaze, mingled with the snarl and roar of a wild beast, and, over her shoulder for a moment, saw him closing in mortal conflict with a deadly monarch of the mountains—an immense grizzly bear.

Only for a moment the scene flashed across her vision—just long enough to bring a cold chill of terror to her heart, then she was out of sight.

Crooked Canyon did not then belie its name. It swept away to the right with a long curve,

and, as she was whirled, breathless and horror-stricken along it, she could catch no glimpse of what might happen to Blaze behind, or any new danger in the way ahead. She saw only the rocks and trees that, circling in, seemed as she advanced, an ever-lifting barrier that changed with the shifting sameness and speed of a kaleidoscope. The ring of Whirlwind's hoofs was flung far ahead and behind; it echoed loneliness in the canyon. And it fell upon listening ears!

A man had halted just in the shade of the scrubby trees that lined the edge of the canyon. He started up at the noise of flying feet, and still shading himself, gazed in the direction of the sound. What he saw was a woman on a maddened horse, keeping her seat with the skill of a practiced rider, yet being borne with dreadful speed toward the jagged rocks and almost impassable precipices which he knew lay at the entrance, not so very far beyond. As she came nearer he looked again, and then sprung madly forward. Had he been a moment sooner he might have grasped the bridle of the animal. As it was, Whirlwind flitted past him like a dream; in front of him was only the opposite wall of the chasm.

He heard the sound of an exclamation; then the crack of a rifle, and felt a something on his cheek as though a hot iron had been laid there. His arms were dropped by his side; they raised again convulsively. He cast a look around, and, as by instinct, he saw on the crown of the bank before him Charles Endicott, with a smoking rifle and a sneer on his face.

When Blaze came rushing down Crooked Canyon, hard on the trail of Edith, his blood trickling from numberless sharp scratches, though yet strong and nervous, he came suddenly upon a man lying stretched out at full length upon the ground, his face resting upon one of the very tracks of Edith's flying steed. When he had turned him over he found that this man was Harry Winkle. It did not take long to examine his hurts. He was still alive, though partially stunned, and he saw at a glance there was a wound on the side of his face from which the blood was slowly oozing.

When he had noted this much, Winkle gathered himself up, rose to a sitting posture and looked around with a wild stare.

"Right there," he muttered, pointing up the slope, "I saw *him*—Endicott! And Edith, she went down the canyon. Let me go, I must find her first."

He got to his feet, looked around, caught up his rifle, moved off with a step rapidly growing firmer.

CHAPTER XIV.

HUNTED TO THE VERGE.

ON the morning of the day after Edith Van Payne had made her escape from War Hawk, the purlieus of Crooked Canyon were enlivened with a rather more than ordinary number of denizens. Not only Edith and Blaze coming through it, and Winkle and Pompey on the west side, but on the east bank were camped Endicott and his followers. As may be supposed, Endicott himself, though a fair shot and

possessed of considerable experience, was not as yet a finished ranger. Any deficiencies in this respect were fully supplied by the attainments of Lariat Dan, the pilot of the party, and his able assistants, Mike Motler and Grizzly Dave. As these men were honest, as times go, they were hardly to be considered trustworthy, and therefore were not admitted into Captain Endicott's confidence. This troubled him very little. He intended to make blind tools of them so long as it was possible. When he could do that no longer—why, they had roughed it on the border long enough to have the gilding pretty well knocked off of the corners of their honesty; and he had but little doubt of being able, if need come, to bend them to his wishes.

In place of Endicott and his followers, perhaps we should say Endicott and his follower. He and Eben Rothven were, at the present time, by themselves, though the other three were almost if not quite within supporting distance. The two, this morning, were holding a council of war. They were ready enough to cast themselves into a desperate adventure, provided they could see with reasonable clearness, the probable result. Just now, as the future appeared somewhat beclouded, they thought it best to consider a bit. While Dave and his two lieutenants were risking their scalps in Straight Canyon, Endicott and Rothven were discussing whether it was likely to prove a profitable business to venture their own in the same direction.

Rothven of course was opposed to the venture. Perhaps in the beginning, seeing Edith Van Payne carried off before his very face, some little enthusiasm had been kindled in his heart. He was not all bad, and there were some traces of chivalry in his composition. However, this enthusiasm had time to die out; and, having other plans of his own, there is but very little doubt that he would have been very willing to leave the captive to her fate.

In the way of this a difficulty had arisen. Even had Endicott been in a frame of mind to listen to reason, something seemed to tell him that there might be some trouble in calling the other men off the pursuit. They were very good specimens of border ruffians; but, having once been laid on the trail, their blood got up. Not being of the calculating, scheming class, it even amused Endicott to see from day to day how earnest they grew.

The two men walked away from their camp in the heat of their discussion. They forgot their prudence. If there had been a hostile red-skin near, he might have stalked up and shot them both.

A little time having elapsed, as might be expected, they got to be cooler, and both having yielded a little, they talked in a more guarded manner. Perhaps it was well for them they did so. Perhaps, on the contrary, it would have been better if they had given some clear and unmistakable manifestation of their presence.

Having become more reasonable, and having expressed their opinions to each other, they separated. At least Endicott remained standing while Rothven went back a few paces.

Standing by himself, with his rifle by his

side, and looking into the canyon before him, Endicott was revolving many thoughts in his mind; yet was not so abstracted as to fail to note the conformation of the ground in front of him. The banks of Crooked Canyon, generally almost perpendicular, were here practicable. He did not think it would be much trouble for one to descend into the ravine, or for one to come up. There was a ledge running down in a regular inclined plane of what seemed to be a rather gradual slope. In reality, this slope was more practicable than it looked. Having noticed this natural roadway, he caught himself wondering why it was there; whether it was ever used; and, if so, by whom and for what purpose. As he wondered he endeavored to cast his glance up the canyon. Then he heard a noise in that direction. What a strange coincidence it was that he should be there!

He saw as in a picture part of that which we have detailed in the last chapter.

Then came before him the woman whose abduction had drawn him into this mountain fastness. He saw, as she went streaming by, Harry Winkle start out from among the shrubbery and trees beneath and opposite to him to make a frantic grasp at her rein; he saw, too, the unsuccessfulness of the attempt, with Miss Van Payne's horse sweeping on, leaving Winkle standing right before him.

A throb of hate and mad passion quivered through him from crown to heel. Hate, passion, fear! In the twinkling of an eye his rifle was at his shoulder; one glance along its brown tube and the finger on the trigger did its work. When Charles Endicott and Harry Winkle at last stood face to face, Endicott fired the first shot.

Something within seemed to tell him that shot was going home just as he meant it to go; so that, when Winkle threw up his hands and pitched forward upon his face, he was not at all surprised. A stumbling-block and a cause of fear were out of his path. Martin had warned him of this man, and, acting on that warning, he thought he had put him beyond mischief and the power of working it.

He had no time for reflection, though. Winkle might lie there a prey for the vultures and coyotes, since Elith Van Payne had passed.

Like lightning his thoughts drove through his brain. Could she gain the mastery over her frantic steed in time to prevent his plunging into certain death? That was the query! Could he aid her? That came next. He knew if she kept straight on it would be certain death. One last long and sharp curve and she came to the end where her choice of ways was a broken, rugged, rocky descent that lay upon one side, the entrance to it almost undiscoverable, and a sheer precipice.

This he thought as he ran.

As the reader has seen, he was a man of both thought and deed, and very often the deed came first; so he was rushing on his errand before some men would have gotten over the first flush of surprise at the woman's appearance. What he had to do was to stop her; then it would be time enough to query how she escaped.

Rothven heard the report of the rifle; when he looked around he saw his comrade dashing

past him at full speed. He did not know whether or no there was danger, and Endicott vouchsafed him no explanation. When he had waited in terrible suspense for a few moments, he crept cautiously to the spot where he had left his co-conspirator standing, and peering anxiously around him, at length saw Bill Blaze coming down the canyon.

The spirit of darkness, who, they say, loves his own, must have loaned Endicott wings, and guided his footsteps, too, perhaps. Through brake and brush he dashed, and over rocks and down declivities; and when Edith at last was able, just at the very line of deadly danger to draw rein, and, quivering and breathless, slip from her saddle, there appeared at her side, as if by magic, with a hand on her bridle-rein and a mocking sneer on his lips, the face and form of the last man she desired to see—Charles Endicott.

Breathless as he was, it took some little time for him to be in speaking condition, and while he was recovering his breath she was recovering her consciousness and courage. The very moment she saw him she argued illy from his presence. To be sure, Bill Blaze was in the vicinity; but she could scarcely give a guess at how near, and when she last caught sight of him, he had such a work before him, that it might well finish him. The corpse of more than one hunter has lain side by side with the body of a dead grizzly.

"Well, friend Edith, we have met again, as I prophesied we would, and I think that now you are fated to hear my story to the end. I have ridden fast and far for a chance to tell my tale, and I doubt if you will be so cruel as not to hear what I would say to you."

She looked at him with a glance of superb scorn.

"Not as fast or as far as I have ridden," she said. "But if you were not in the same field as the fox during the race, I suppose you think you are at least in at the death. Perhaps you are. You might, perchance, claim my dead body—it is certain you shall never have lot or parcel of my living soul."

"Oh, how brave we are! It reminds me of the grand old times when we were both heroes. You think you hate me, do you? Perhaps you do. I know I have done you deadly wrong; but that wrong I am most anxious to right. Your judgment is clear beyond that of average mortals, and I but ask you to exercise it in this case. I am sure that you will, if you treat me fairly, acknowledge that, in all that past, on which you now profess to scorn to look, I acted in a manly, noble way, and as best I could for your best interests. Won't you give me that credit?"

"You! you! Give credit to you! Why, you abominable, loathsome spawn of the slum and the prison—it was not the way that I was injured, but the *thing* that injured me! When I think of *that*, I quiver and grow white from crown to toe. Is it a wonder that I went wild when I realized it? Leave me, leave me before I die of rage!"

She flamed up like a mad tigress. Her eyes flashed on him with a baleful light, and her white, regular teeth shut with an angry click.

Only a weapon at hand and she would have shot him dead; only strength, and she would have torn him limb from limb.

And he? He stood and looked her in the eyes without flinching. Only his face was deathly white for a moment, and then there rose a something in his throat that seemed to be choking him as he smothered his anger.

"You want it to be without the gloves, do you? So be it. Here! See here! These hands of mine are tender enough for a backwoodsman, are they not? Yet see where they are half-eaten off at the wrists! Ha! ha! you don't see it—why, they are dropping off from the burning touch of the cursed gyves. Right round there is where they clung. No mark there? Well, there ought to be, for I've worn the fetters. Yes, there's the hand of a jail-bird with the prison smutch on it; and he offers it to you. You don't accept, do you?"

She shrunk away from him with a gesture of horror, yet her eyes were fixed upon his face as though by fascination, while he continued:

"Did you never hear of a martyr to justice? Do you know nothing of the cry, 'Hang some one to quiet the public nerves?' Do you know how a name can be murdered, and that, for such a murder, there can be no retributive justice? I loved you once, and I love you now; you loved me once, and you shall love me again. The ex-convict is at your feet; but he woos you in the teeth of danger; he does not forget that. There is little time to be lost in idle play. We have had all the romance years ago; we come now to the stern reality."

She burst out: "I did not love you then, I will not love you now. I have passed beyond the regions of romance, and learned what I would that I had known then. You cannot drive me and you dare not kill me."

"Dare I not? Kill! kill! Do you think no killing has ever been done? Didn't you hear the ring of my rifle but a moment ago? Force rules the world—and *here* I am power! Along Back Load Trace there were weapons ready to come at your call, but here the tables are turned. Within beck are three sturdy ruffians and—a *preacher*. Not a namby-pamby, white-neckerchiefed nothing, but a man of nerve that can be relied on; yet his handiwork will last in spite of pride or prejudice. Strange to find a blacksmith here—but reserve to the winds!—you shall have a chance to test his workmanship, and see how you like his welding."

As he stepped forward she shrunk back with a hunted look in her eyes. At bay at last! His words fell like the stroke of a knife. And to her there was a terrible suggestiveness in them. At whom had his rifle been aimed a moment ago? She did not doubt him—she feared him. And the fear of her fear was overpowering. Still, she sought to keep a solid front. She would fight gamely to the last.

"Hands off me, sir; you have shown your hand too soon. I am to be wooed, perhaps, but cold as you find me, I like not your love-making. Satan himself would look like an angel of light by your side."

"We are growing nice," he said, with a mocking sneer. "A woman who lives by herself with the angelic trappers of Back Load Trace

may well know in what guise the angel of darkness is likely to come. Mine you are, and as mine I claim you."

The moral strength of Edith Van Payne gave way, and left behind a horrible terror. She saw no way of escape but one, and, with a sudden spring, she sought to fling herself upon the animal that had borne her so gallantly from her captors the night before. She sought to do this, but was unsuccessful. A bound, and Endicott was by her side, and had caught her round the waist with a grasp of iron.

"Ho, there, Eben!" he shouted, and she heard footsteps beyond, in the direction in which he had pointed. With a mad fury she caught Endicott by the throat; she writhed from his grasp; she struck him with her clinched hand. Then as, despising her blows as though they were but strokes of a feather, he dashed at her, she gave one wild, piercing and despairing shriek, and, with the rapidity of light, leaped from the brink of the precipice.

And as she leaped the report of three rifles echoed her scream.

CHAPTER XV.

THREE SHOTS—AT LAST!

WHEN Bill Blaze found Harry Winkle lying prone upon the ground, though he looked in every direction with a rapid glance, yet he gave no sign that the sight was unexpected, and when Winkle raised to his feet and staggered off after muttering a couple of broken sentences, instead of attempting to stop him, or wasting time in questions, he rapidly extracted from those sentences the very pith of their meaning, and as rapidly decided how he should act.

That Edith Van Payne had gone forward and further on her headlong journey he readily understood; and that no aid of his could avert the danger of a catastrophe at the mouth of the canyon. Unless she succeeded in checking the speed of Whirlwind, before he could succeed in reaching her, her troubles would doubtless be over. That she had done this he hoped, and almost believed. The words of Winkle, however, suggested a new complication.

Charles Endicott was doubtless in the neighborhood, and had fired the shot which he had heard. Having once made out this much he could easily trace the course of events.

When Endicott fired he watched long enough to see Winkle go down, and then dashed across toward the plateau upon which Crooked Canyon debouched. If Edith was safe, she was probably in his hands. Judging from the past he could easily guess what sort of a reception Winkle would meet with if, in his present bewildered state, he came wandering near.

All this Blaze took in by almost one sweep of thought and his resolution was taken, as it were by instinct. He gave but a single glance upward to confirm his opinion of the practicability of the ascent, and then threw himself into the work he fancied he saw before him. Up the steep and jagged side of the canyon he rushed, and then forward directly over the jutting promontory around which Crooked Canyon swept to its point of debouchure. With reckless carelessness he crashed through the bushes and underbrush, intent only on reaching the point for

which he was aiming. When he had traversed half the distance he came upon a man standing, leaning against a tree. The man was Rothven. The instinct of the trapper befriended him, since it removed the finger, so hastily thrown there, from a trigger that was seldom pulled in vain. Eben's appearance was not aggressive. On the contrary there was a listlessness about him that told rather of careless waiting than anxious expectancy. Only he was looking in the direction in which the trapper was going. When Endicott had passed him he had somehow comprehended not only what had happened but also what might occur; and preferred not to come on the carpet prematurely. In fact, he cared little to appear at all. The glimpse of Blaze, whom he really did not notice until that worthy had passed him, rather startled him. From his appearance he judged it was one of Martin's men. Then a feeling of curiosity obtained the mastery over him, and he followed on to see what was in that strange race. He had not taken many paces when he heard the voice of Endicott: "Ho, there, Eben!" and he came in sight of Blaze just as a wild and piercing scream, uttered by a woman's voice, rung in his ears.

He saw Blaze stop suddenly and peer through a rift in the foliage. What the trapper saw must have been exciting, since his eyes dilated, his whole form quivered. That was just for a second; in a second more he stood like a statue, his left foot forward, his left arm extended, his right arm up, his finger on the trigger of the rifle that covered Charles Endicott's heart.

Edith Van Payne had obtained such a place in her uncle's heart that Martin sometimes fancied he must have a dual nature. He forgot that having lapsed from civilization to barbarism, from the circles of refinement to the uncouthness of ultra-frontier life, and having so fully settled to that position as to feel as though 'to the manor born,' that nevertheless, chameleon-like, change of diet might bring him back to some semblance of his color. He had been going his way while Edith went hers, and the affinity between the two seemed to be but slight. Once or twice he had looked at her queerly and thought that, perchance, there was a spice of poetical nonsense, of unadulterated and unselfish feeling, yet lingering around him. As often he had cast the thought aside after a moment's reflection. Now, for a day or two, he had had an opportunity to gauge himself, and found that this willful, wild-eyed niece of his had become, during the gradually developing months of their acquaintance, more dear to him than he could have ever imagined—even away back in younger days that floated by over quieter waters. And, mixed with all this, was the wild, hard pride that close behind him he brought strength and skill and sagacity in no mean force; called out in a moment's warning to follow, to aid, to rescue. He wondered if Edith believed that he was on the trail; he queried if she knew how stout arms grasping trusting weapons were ready to strike in for her at the first opportunity. Somehow, he never doubted of her present safety from any serious harm, or despaired of her ulti-

mate rescue. Strongly self-reliant, he had seen success too often follow his undertakings, to feel faint at heart now.

Two things troubled him immensely. That he should have been deceived at the outset of the pursuit by Indian strategy, and the defection of Endicott and his men. He accounted at first thought for the latter, by the supposition that Endicott's men had seen through the stratagem, and keeping the knowledge to themselves, the party had flown off at a tangent, leaving him, Martin, to follow the false trail. When they met again, if meet they should, he would have a small account to settle with Mr. Charles Endicott.

That meeting was destined to take place rather sooner than he anticipated. By chance he struck the trail made by five men, and, on consultation, was satisfied that it was made by the deserters. He questioned, then, within himself, whether Endicott was not in league with the Indians. Such alliances had been formed before then; and he knew that, if it should be practicable, Endicott would stop at nothing to carry out his end. However that might be, he believed that if he followed that trail, he would most likely come upon traces of Edith. And so believing this, he desisted from his intention of pushing on to the further end of Straight Canyon, and turned off to one side. After a time, he came to where they had halted the previous night. Here the party had divided, three men going to the north, while the remaining two had turned aside, westward.

Again he followed Endicott, though he sent out a detachment of trusty men in the wake of Lariat Dan. He rode on quietly; he halted suddenly. He saw a sight that brought him from his horse in an instant—Edith Van Payne was struggling in the arms of Charles Endicott. He saw her throw the man off and rush forward; as she leaped over the brink of the precipice, his rifle lay ready for the base of Endicott's brain, and, as her shrill scream echoed and re-echoed through gulch and canyon, his finger tightened on the trigger.

Pompey came slowly back from an unsuccessful search for traces of Edith. Without being seen he had reconnoitered Endicott's camp, and satisfied himself that she was not there. As far as the simple question of Edith Van Payne's rescue, unattached to any other idea, went, it is likely that, he felt very little interest. But he had an interest in whatever concerned his employer and friend, Harry Winkle, and so could bring a second handed enthusiasm to the pursuit. While he was watching Endicott's camp, he saw Lariat Dan leave it in company with Grizzly Dan and Mike Motler. He recognized all three of those worthies, and at one time had a half-formed notion of revealing himself to them, and attempting to sound them in search of information. When he saw that they turned their faces northward, and started as if on a quest, he altered his mind. Understanding that they were in the employ of the deadly enemy of Harry Winkle, he did not think it advisable to let his presence be known, unless to secure some positive advantage; and he could see none at

this present. So he remained concealed among the cedars on the *butte* and let the three go their way. Perhaps an hour later, he was listlessly returning to find Winkle, the bushes on his left parted, and a man stepped out, and ranged up by his side. A glance told him it was Mike Motler, whom he supposed miles away.

Motler was a quiet, almost surly sort of man, who went his own way and carried his own pelts. His employer, when he had one, seldom heard him speak; but he generally did as he was ordered without useless questions. Therefore he was a valuable man. Sometimes, though, he had an opinion of his own, and acted on it. Wherein he was slightly unreliable. As he pulled trigger quick, and always shot plumb-center, he was an unpleasant man to have a difficulty with.

This Motler nodded to Pompey, as though they were going into camp together after a separation of only a couple of hours instead of as many years. Pompey understanding him pretty well, did the same, and casually remarked:

"Whar's Dan?"

"Lookin' fer tame rabbits in a coyote's hole. A-bu'stin' himself to find what ain't thar."

"Whar then?"

"Dunno. Mebbe in Heaven. She'd better stay thar. Somethin' rotten on the board, an' I've bunched my hand. I kin pass the brick an' lose my ante: durned ef I want to see his blind."

Motler made this speech in detachments, and with a preoccupied air. Pompey listened and walked on. Motler suddenly startled him by the query:

"Whar yer goin'?"

"Nowhar much—camp I guess."

"Ef yer want to gamble, put yer money on a funeral. I feel it in my bones."

"Whose funeral am dat, den? I hain't heerd o' no corpse."

"Never you mind. Ther corpus 'll be laid out by the time mourners hes arrove."

The African was not cowardly, but he certainly was a little superstitious. The moody tone of Motler sounded almost prophetic, and he wondered whether it could possibly be his own funeral that was meant. He had seen men rubbed out in unexpected ways and at short notice. He revolved this in his mind a few moments, and even questioned whether it would not be best to turn aside and let his unsought companion attend the obsequies by himself. Perhaps he might have done so had the meeting occurred a little sooner; but the catastrophe came quicker than he expected.

First he heard sounds beyond the intervening vail of foliage, and obtained a confused impression that there was that transpiring which needed his attention. Personal fears were flung to the winds, as Mike Motler, quickening his gait, whispered:

"Didn't I tell yer? Wait an' ye'll hear the bell a-ringin'. I'm a-holdin' the rope now."

An ominous peal that bell would give when its rope was pulled! Motler was holding in his hands a twelve-pound rifle!

What occurred after the wall of branches that finally intervened was parted, Pompey could never fully comprehend. At least he remembered the shout of a man, a confused struggle,

the screams of a woman; then the death-bell at his side tolled once.

Love and fear combined with hate to lend wings to Harry Winkle. His brain cleared and clouded again; but with the clearing came strength; that remained. He flew down the canyon with a speed that was prodigious. Yet Edith had had a start that would have rendered his efforts unavailing if she had gone straight and unchecked forward. The thought that such would be the case, combining with the burning hate which Endicott's late attempt on his life had aroused, brought back the confusion, and he passed over a few hundred yards of ground without sight or hearing. A regiment of soldiers, a tribe of Indians, might have passed him unheeded. When he came around the last crook in Crooked Canyon, and the straight vista which led to the sheer precipice opened up before him, he came back to life, real and earnest, again. He took in the picture before him—the woman he loved struggling in the arms of the man he hated. He would have shot Endicott on the spot could he have done so without danger to Edith; he brought his rifle to a ready. While he looked, running as he looked, she broke away from the man, gave a great bound, and he heard her despairing cry echoed by the ring of firearms. He did not stop, though, to see who had fired, at whom, or with what effect. When two great master-passions clash, one of them is, for the time at least, ground to the wall. When love and hate became antagonistic in his breast, hate was swept aside like a feather in the wind.

To the right ran the narrow, winding path by which Blaze had led him up into Crooked Canyon. Down this he darted with his teeth clinched, and his hands, now unincumbered by the useless rifle he had cast aside, extended. He did not even give a cry or utter a moan, but there was a fear of a horror in his eye that seemed wilder than any half-crazed light that had ever shone there in the time of his previous agonies. To the right and left of him the jagged rocks heaved up in great billows, horribly suggestive. He wished himself back in the roaring surf of the previous years. When, half-way down, he came to a ledge that led away and around toward the precipice, visible and accessible by a crevice in the side of the gulch he was descending, he could bear the suspense no more. No need to pause and think if its path was dangerous when once there had taken possession of him the thought that by following it he could sooner catch sight of Edith Van Payne or her mortal remains. Throughout, along, all quiveringly expectant, and ears open for a cry or a groan, sped Winkle.

And so, after the weary, maddening years of separation, alone, suspended, as it were, between earth and heaven, on a narrow footing that seemed all too precarious for life and living mortals, met at the last Harry Winkle and Edith Van Payne!

When from Charles Endicott's arms Edith had rushed to a leap she feared as fatal, there came to her the stupor of falling scarce broken by the crash through the top of the kindly intervening cedar. Bruised and hard shaken, she lay coiled up at the foot of the tree, ready, at a half-conscious movement, to fall still further, even to

eternal nothingness, when there crawled toward her a man, through what perils he was passing, or how he was avoiding them he knew not. He only knew that his soul's other half was hanging over certain death, with no other eye than his to see her danger, and no other arm than his to rescue her.

At last! From off the knee of the cedar he drew her, up onto the wider footing of the yet-narrow ledge. Kneeling with his back against the wall of solid rock, he held in his arms his own long-lost darling! Away above him Martin, Blaze and the others stood, at the brink, peering downward. He heard their shouts like remembrance of a noise in a dream. The sound of a gentle sigh escaping from her lips drowned all other voices. He clutched her closer, looked at her wan, white cheeks, and, as her wild eyes opened covered her mouth with kisses. He thought, too, that her lips moved to meet his. For a moment or two longer she lay in his arms cold, nerveless, colorless, almost lifeless. Yet she was the woman he loved!

Consciousness began slowly to return. She hid her face on his breast at its first dawning and slowly gathered strength. When at last she heard the loud beating of his heart she looked up, for the first time forgetting the danger from which she had fled, and the danger from which she had been saved. She saw a face, firm-set, yet beaming, resolution yet happiness penciled thereon. With a scream she made an almost fatal attempt to throw herself from his embrace.

The steel-set arm wound itself tighter around her waist, with steady strength drawing her again closely to its owner's breast.

"Harry! You here! Let me go! Let me go to death; but let me go!"

"Not so, my darling. Here, on my breast you rest. Fate's last bolt has been shot, and I laugh now at the empty quiver. Mine you are, now and forever."

"Never, never! Let me go! I say again—I have said and sworn!"

"And so have I—listen while I swear again."

His face grew darker, his brow wrinkled ominously, while a hard red light shone in his eyes.

"I have sworn that nothing should come between us—nothing, be it mortal or immortal—honor or dishonor—death or perdition. And now I swear—here on the brink of death, where a false step or unguarded movement is utter ruin—that if follies and fancies are to sunder us again, if there is no hope for us together here, then the only thing left is a sudden death for both. You know me well, you ought to believe me completely; now I swear that you stain my soul with a double murder. Mine in life rather, else before another hundred beats of the heart that loves you—you know how wildly—these arms unclasp; but beyond the shadow. Together we henceforth live, or here we two together die! Choose!"

There was a yearning look of a hungry soul in his eyes. He quivered and grew white with suppressed love and horror; but his voice did not falter, and the red heat of a desperate resolve was round him. As he spoke he raised himself to a standing position, and holding the woman

more closely than ever, braced himself for a deadly spring.

She then for a moment was silent; her white face grew whiter; her teeth were set hard and words of violence came surging up to her tongue's end. She strove to utter them; but the whiter, firmer set, more desperate face and the great struggling soul before her drove them back. There was war in the woman, and the man watching that wild face thought she would die before him.

Then the stronger will conquered; the haggard and strong look broke up: a gleam of submission and unutterable love rolled across her face. She dropped her cheek back upon his shoulder, till her lips almost touched his ear, her arms twined about his neck, and she whispered:

"Harry, my poor darling, we will live for each other!"

THE END.

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